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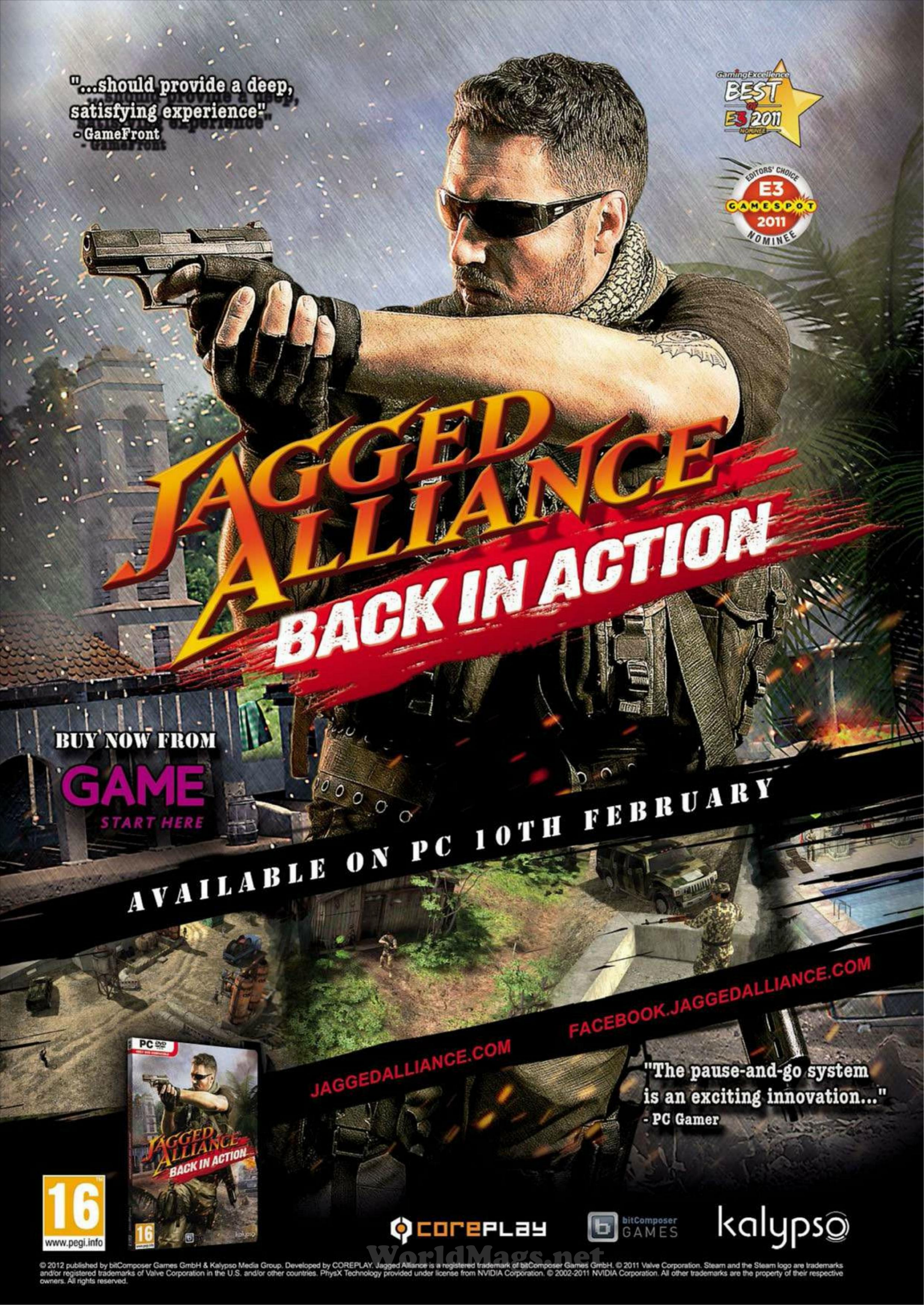

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#237 MARCH 2012

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Tropical storm

It's hard not to notice how many remakes, reboots and sequels make up the mainstream games industry. But in a month like this, it's also hard to object. *Far Cry* is coming back as a hybrid of the original's refreshing tropical island setting and the second game's smart, systems-driven combat. Rich has seen it and came back enthused – he'll tell you all about it on page 36.

X-COM's return as a stylish tactical first-person shooter was more controversial. But only because 2K hadn't told us the whole story: they've also enlisted *Civilization* developers Firaxis to develop a true remake. *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* is a turn-based, top-down strategy game in which any of your men can permanently die at the tentacles of the alien invaders. Graham's seen it first hand and interviewed the team, and he'll take you through how it compares to the first game on page 44.

As for the rest of us, we've been brushing up on tactics, tips and the nerdiest knowledge for our massive Be the Best feature on page 52. We'll take you through new character builds to try in both *Skyrim* and *Team Fortress 2*, how to make a pink lightsaber in *The Old Republic*, how to wreck a tank in *Battlefield 3*, and lots more. Enjoy the issue.

Tim Edwards

TIM EDWARDS
EDITOR
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@hanknova

Talk to PC Gamer
Have your say! Join our forum at *www.pcgamer.com/forum*

BRINGING YOU THE SCOOPS THIS MONTH...

Tom Francis
@pentadact
Ate a chocolate caramel doughnut covered in gold, denied that the 50p he found has changed him.

Graham Smith
@gonnas
Used journalism to spot the words 'MP balance' on a whiteboard at *XCOM* developers Firaxis.

Chris Thursten
@cthursten
Watched a galaxy die. It was destroyed by a giant ewok. Makes you think, doesn't it?

Rich McCormick
@richmcc
Sprouted two black tentacle arms – one to edit the news section, the other for reviews.

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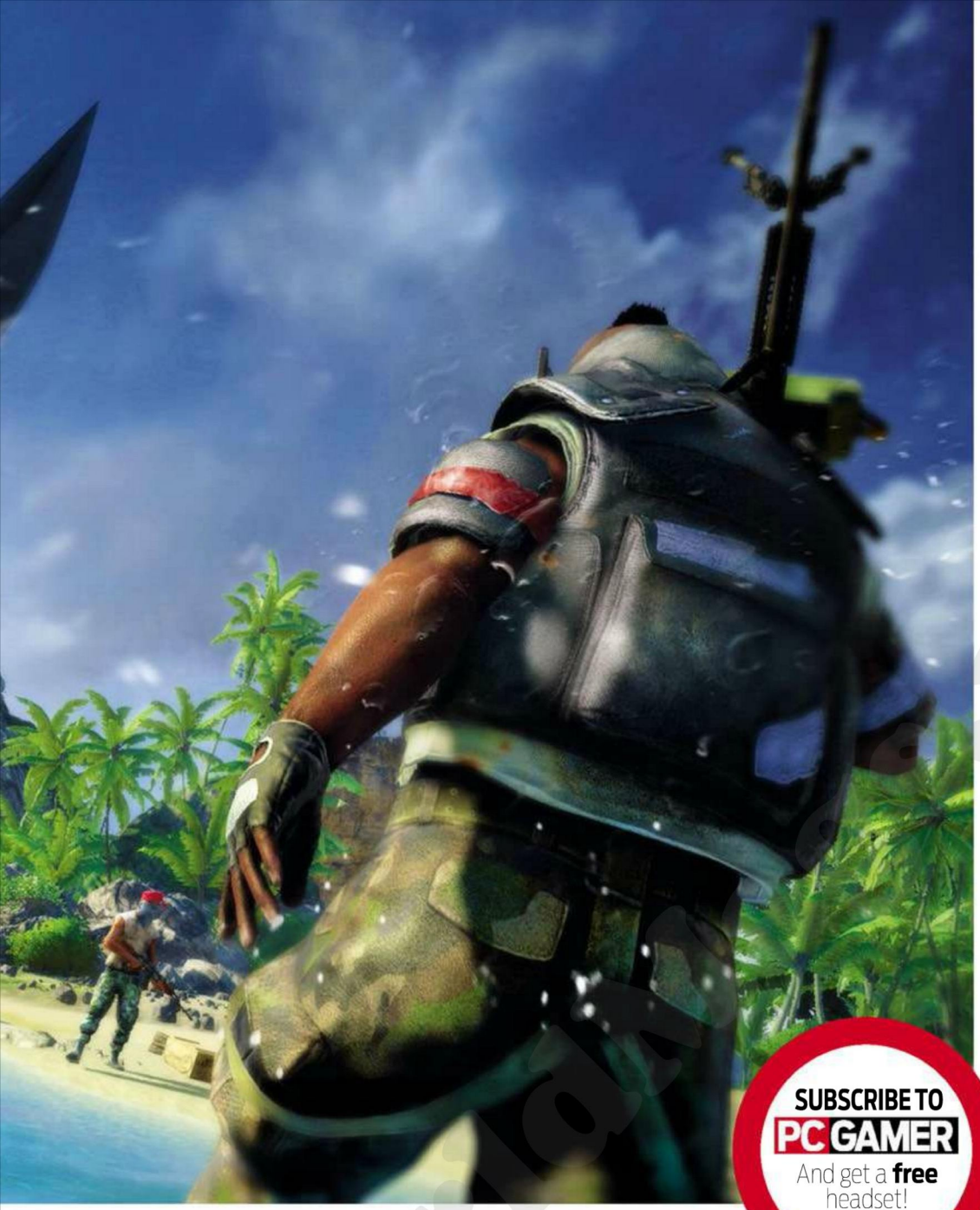

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The magic of digital delivery

THE BIG STORY Paradox Interactive missed most of their targets in 2011 – and still had their biggest year ever

Paradox Interactive's Fredrik Wester isn't one to mince his words. Just over a year ago, he announced that 2011 would see his company release 16 games on five platforms, improve quality assurance, launch an online service, and grow as a business.

As it happened, they released nine games on three platforms, and *Sword of the Stars 2* launched in a cripplingly buggy state. Paradox Connect, their game-spanning achievements and social service, was – in Wester's own words – in a "coma" for most of the year. "My promises last year were as empty as a prediction by Michael Pachter," he told attendees at 2012's Paradox convention.

He got one of them right, however. Paradox's gross revenue grew by 75% in a single year – increasing profits by 250% – thanks to two things: digital distribution, and *Magicka*. The success of the wizard-'em-up has had an enormous impact on Paradox's income and outlook. Over 1.3 million copies of *Magicka* have now been sold, plus a further four million DLC packs. It's a huge sum for a company that still sees itself as an indie publisher.

Wester credits this success to a comprehensive and forward-looking embrace of digital sales. In 2006, online distribution made up only 1.5% of the company's revenue. By 2011, it was 97%. "We don't really need retail any more, and that is a relief" Wester says. "One of the things preventing more creative gaming has been the retail challenge. I can only say this now because we're not depending on them."

The publishers' newfound resources are enabling Paradox to provide Swedish start-up studios with free office space, equipment, and contacts. Wester wants to become the "grandaddy" of indie, working with small teams to produce focused, replayable games. They've recently opened additional studios called Paradox North and South, because, according to Wester, "great game studios always have a 'North'."

The proof, as ever, is in the games. Paradox's output is still spotty, and the breadth of their offering can't compensate for the fact that games are still being released with major problems. If they can keep their latest round of promises, however, 2012 could be another very big year for Paradox. ■

Chris Thursten

Despite a dodgy start, *Magicka* has become Paradox's biggest game.

Much more *Magicka* DLC is planned for 2012.

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WHERE'S YOUR HEAD PRIPYAT?

IRRADIATED GSC GAME WORLD LOOKING FOR *STALKER 2* FUNDING

Despite reports that *Stalker 2* devs GSC Game World had closed, they're still up and running – and looking for cash to keep the project going. The sequel to 2007's spooky sci-fi RPG was in serious doubt after CEO Sergei Grigorovich announced his intention to close the studio, but it's looking more likely that he's left the company he founded. "We will do our best to continue," said a Tweet from a GSC Game World representative. "However, at this point, nothing is certain." **HW**

THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES

STEAMED EA'S DOWNLOAD SERVICE TO TAKE ON 11 NEW PUBLISHERS

The PC digital distribution service, Origin, is set to expand as 11 new publishers jump into EA's great big internet boat. Among the names are CD Projekt Red (*The Witcher 2*), 1C Company (*King's Bounty*) and Freebird Games (*To The Moon*). Trion Worlds' MMO, *Rift*, is also available on the service. Origin was previously dominated by Electronic Art's triple-A titles, so the availability of more 'hip' indie games could be an indication that the publisher is attempting to capture some of Steam's more esoteric customers. **HW**

HEALTH BAR

SORTING GOOD NEWS FROM BAD

Winners

Steam
The PC's premier distribution service sees more than a 100% increase in sales.

IGF Finalists
Dear Esther, *Spelunky*, and our own Tom Francis's *Gunpoint* make the finals of the 2012 IGF

CD Projekt
Witcher II publishers respond to the community and drop legal threats against alleged pirates.

BioWare
The Old Republic's first big patch introduces a major PvP exploit.

Zynga
The social games developer's share value nears an all-time low after a poor start to the year.

ITV
The TV channel gets its wrists slapped by Ofcom after footage from *Arma* is used in a documentary.

Faildogs

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Project Fiona. Be fair, this *is* just a prototype.

The PC sneaks into your living room

Big companies are using hardware to change the way you play

Your PC has long been plotting the invasion of your living room. Now some of PC gaming's biggest companies are helping it. Razer, Alienware and Microsoft are all bringing out hardware very different to what we've seen before.

These are devices designed to encroach on the times you're *not* glued to your rig. Devices that get on better with your couch and your living room telly than they do your desk and office chair. Some would also say they're devices we didn't ask for, but hey, those people are unimaginative mopers.

Alienware's X51 is perhaps the most traditionally PC-ish of the new living room invaders. It's a black box with green lights – that much we're used to already. But it's got a slot-loading DVD drive and is designed to sit under your TV. It is, to all intents and purposes, a turbo-charged console – an Xbox 1080, years before console gamers could imagine such a thing. Compared to your big-boy PC, it's a little under hardware par – shipping with either an i3, i5 or i7 processor depending on price, and bundled with a slightly puny GeForce 545 or 555 graphics card that lies flat against the motherboard – but it still blows Microsoft's console out of the technological water.

It's obviously designed to provide a step up from the console, but at just under a grand for the top-end model – compared to the 360's hundred-odd quid – it might seem a little steep for people in the market for a living room media centre, especially when it comes with no monitor or mouse.

Similarly mouseless is Razer's conceptual Fiona tablet. This ridiculous beast looks like an iPad bolted to a Wii controller, dreamed up by a sentient Game Gear. It's still in prototype stage, yet Razer have already come under fire from PC gamers for the potential machine's silly styling. In some cases, its detractors are right: it's far too bulky a machine to carry with you on the train, for one. But Razer have hit back, saying that they're trying to innovate in a PC market that's set in stone.

"It's easy to see how the Fiona would be perfect for MMO players grinding out quests on the sofa"

Like the X51, the Fiona would find its best home in the living room, as a semi-nomadic gaming device for whiling away hours in front of the TV. The dual-stick system would make it ideal for action games, but with a tablet-sized space to fit graphics hardware in, the visual quality could suffer.

The lack of a mouse and keyboard is a problem – not because all PC derivatives need the peripherals to work – but because it's easy to see how the Fiona would be perfect for MMO players grinding out quests on the sofa, and the meagre dual stick and eight-button setup doesn't leave enough space for hotkeys.

Weirdly, it's left to the final invader to provide the most exciting future for living room PC gaming. Microsoft's Kinect is nothing new: it's been out on Xbox 360 for more than a year now. Attached to the console, it's a party game enabler; opened up for hackers and tinkerers on the PC, it's become a gateway to gaming's potential future. Unsupported, people have already used the 3D camera to make PC games better, adding head tracking to shooters, and projecting *Doom* demons onto desks. Handed to the indie scene with the support of a willing Microsoft, the PC Kinect could, via the living room, take our gaming forward. And even if it doesn't, at least we'll finally get to play *Dance Central 2*. ■

Chris Thursten

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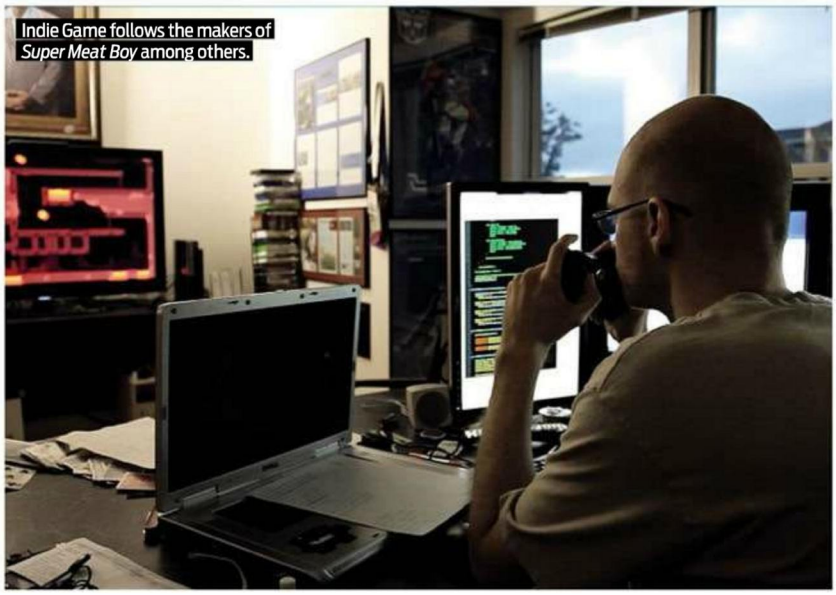
Indie Game follows the makers of *Super Meat Boy* among others.

Indie Game: The Movie: the TV series

TV studio HBO is bringing indie developers to the small screen

Indie Game: The Movie has been picked out of the Sundance Film Festival official selection for adaptation by HBO, the American TV network behind such drama series as The Sopranos, Game of Thrones and Deadwood.

The film is a 90-minute documentary following the developers behind *Super Meat Boy*, *Braid* and the currently Xbox-exclusive *FEZ*. It's an exploration of the personal side of making a game, from inspiration to hardship, public exposure and (hopefully) acceptance and success.

The TV series, however, won't feature real developers – it's being described by creators James Swirsky and Lisanne Pajot as a 30 minute fictional show based on the movie but not necessarily featuring any of the people or games in it.

Producer Scott Rudin's resumé includes Facebook movie The Social Network, the Coen brothers' remake of True Grit, and baseball biopic Moneyball. Considering his past work, it's likely that it was the human dimension of Indie Game: The Movie that attracted Rudin's interest – and with that in mind, it's unlikely that this will be the indie games sitcom that some commentators feared it might be. You won't be seeing Larry David play Jonathan Blow any time soon.

Indie Game: The Movie premiered at Sundance in January, and the makers are currently taking requests for screenings – and offers of assistance – through the film's official website at *indiegamethemovie.com*. The movie's success wouldn't have been possible without the support of the gaming community, which donated over $90,000 in 72 hours over the course of two Kickstarter campaigns. That groundswell of support is what allowed Indie Game: The Movie to go on to garner critical acclaim and the interest of HBO.

It's hopefully a sign that games and the people who make them are on track to receive more thorough, knowledgeable exposure in the mainstream media. ■

Chris Thursten

Fingers crossed for a PC version of *FEZ*.

FEZ's Phil Fish hopes the film will inspire a new generation.

SEGA SPINS OFF

INDUSTRY *TOTAL WAR* PUBLISHERS LAUNCH NEW STUDIO

UK games industry stalwarts Sega have announced a new studio based in the West Midlands. Hardlight will focus on 'Creating high quality, innovative game experiences for both current and future platforms'. So that's nice. Their first game will be exclusive to the PlayStation Vita, but given Sega's love of all things PC we can expect to see some releases coming soon. Apparently Hardlight have been formed from the remnants of Sega Racing Team, so maybe they'll give their fellow West Midlanders Codemasters a run for their money. **HW**

PUNKBUSTER EXPLOITED

BOOTING IN *BATTLEFIELD 3*, HACKERS BAN YOU

Unscrupulous gamers have taken to using exploits to boot honest *Battlefield 3* players from servers. The hackers claim to be able to ruin not just a player's enjoyment, but also their reputation and standing, using PunkBuster.

Battlefield 3 community manager crash7800 says they're looking into it. "We definitely know that something isn't right and we're working to fix it ASAP," he said, adding that affected players should "join servers that are not running PunkBuster." **CT**

SAY WHAT?

THE MONTH IN TONGUES

"These days it's become hip to pay for indie games. That's partly down to people charging for it, like with the Humble Indie Bundle, and partly because of Steam doing awesome stuff."
Markus 'Notch' Persson, **on what's hip**

"We're actually a lot more innovative within the MMO space than comparable games in other spaces like the FPS and the action genre."
James Ohlen, **game director on *The Old Republic*, answers critics who claim his game doesn't offer anything new**

"Our job isn't just to put out a game, it's to release the next *Diablo* game. No one will remember if the game is late, only if it's great."
Jay Wilson, **game director on *Diablo III*, announces another delay**

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THE SPY

The Spy is now on Twitter. His account name cannot be typed.

UK retailers GAME have been one of the Spy's core sources for privileged intel since the early millennium, when they were known as The Disappointing Electronics Boutique. And it hasn't been easy. Each time they changed their security procedures it called for a new and more dastardly ruse. The photocopier disguise. The cardboard-cutout-of-The-Spy disguise. The cow-sized PC game box disguise. Legitimately working there for four years.

And now they're just *tweeting* this stuff. "EA presentation was great," GAME's twitter status read. "Had mentions of a new *Medal of Honour* and *Need for Speed 13*! EA have an exciting year ahead." Great. Just send that confidential information out to 33,000 followers who've never had to share a musty game box with a 350-page manual and a copy protection code sheet. The Spy quits.

With a similarly disappointing lack of secrecy, Blizzard have quietly but publicly posted a job listing for a Franchise Development Manager who will be required to "work with major consumer brands to facilitate product placement and licensing within the world of Blizzard Entertainment's next-gen MMO that enhances the gameplay experience". It was nearly three weeks before The Spy stopped vomiting.

Returning to more cautious sources, The Spy conducted some serious internet research that didn't involve just reading Reddit for six hours. The Spy knew that Activision had registered all the domain names from blackops3.com to blackops6.com. But some cybersquatter – allegedly known for his taste in hats and his ability to fit inside a turn-of-the-millennium game box – was sitting on blackops2.com. Clearly, the series would have to be cancelled.

However, sources close to The Spy suggest that money may now have changed hands. Suddenly, Activision own the blackops2.com domain name. But why now? Could this be a sign that a sequel to the *Call of Duty* spin-off is being prepared? Think, Mason, think! The domain, Mason, the domain! Why now, Mason, why now? Would it help if we electrocuted you again Mason, would it help?

Leafing through some recently acquired unmarked bills, The Spy pinged his insider trading contacts for the latest illegal tips. They advised him to invest his funds in ailing publisher THQ, whose shares now cost a frugal 66p each. But The Spy knew better than to bite. Via secret channels, games consultant Kevin Dent claimed that THQ's planned Warhammer 40,000 MMO, *Dark Millennium Online*, had been cancelled. Secret channels? OK, it was Twitter again.

THQ released a statement denying any decision had been made, but added ominously that "we have made decisions to ensure that the company is strategically addressing the most attractive markets". The Spy knows what this means. *Dark Millennium Online* will be rejigged to feature cute monsters engaging in Loveheart exchanges over the fate of a fluffy pink bug-eyed rabbit made of glitter trapped in a space bubble. The Spy has seen the plans.

> **"Is this a sign that a sequel to *Black Ops* is being prepared?"**

More promisingly, the Spy recently overheard a voice actor he cannot name informing Official Xbox Magazine's own deniable operative that he'd recorded lines for something called *Half-Life 2: Episode Three*. While the absurdly late conclusion of Valve's episodic experiment has been the subject of an endless stream of overexcited bad intel, this one rings true. The Spy knows they're working on it. The Spy knows their voice actors frequently let slip what they shouldn't. And the Lord knows it's about time.

Supporting the theory that we're due some news soon, Valve's schedule for 2012 is suspiciously clear. A company who frequently have three major projects on the go are presently working on... *Dota 2*. But their recent announcement of a version of Steam for Android and iPhone gives us some clues to that too: is that app really going to remain a portable chat client with a shop? As PC-centric as Valve are, they're not the kind of company to close the door on the possibility of mobile games on Steam. It's how The Spy gets in.

Satisfied, The Spy returned to his subterranean lair, eager to plan his next piece of games industry espionage. A new coded message arrived. The Spy isn't revealing what it says yet, but expect to see a full translation in the next issue of PC Gamer. Spy out. ■

The Spy

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FACE OFF

Should all games have a multiplayer mode?

YES Human brains are less predictable, and a lot nicer to play with, than AI.

NO Attempts to bolt multiplayer onto some games only cheapens them.

Owen Hill had a network card implanted when he was six. He hasn't gamed alone since.

Tom Francis has been alone on this Earth for 4.3 million years, watching. Waiting.

OH: Graphics and sound have evolved dramatically over the past few years, but AI throttles game development. I say cut out the middle man – put humans in control of our stupid NPCs. We've got the bandwidth so why not?

TF: It's true that AI is still pretty bad, but sometimes that's what makes the game work. The guards in *Deus Ex* are simple-minded, and it means there are lots of clever and fun ways to trick them. Then, in a patch, they added *Deus Ex* multiplayer. And it was like making a multiplayer Da Vinci by getting two people to beat each other to death with framed prints of the Mona Lisa.

OH: The Mona Lisa would have been waaaay better if it had some form of multiplayer component. Da Vinci admitted that on his deathbed. Restricted AI makes players feel powerful in the same way that holding half a Guinness makes you feel like a giant.

TF: The BEST way?

OH: Also: how the hell do you grief a bot? I've tried griefing a bot and they don't react like Tim or Rich. In fact, it takes almost all the fun out of griefing when there's no one there to grief.

TF: OK, rational argument has failed, so I'm just going to name games and you have to tell me how a multiplayer mode would improve them. *Solitaire*.

OH: Rename it *Battle Solitaire*, sit opposite your opponent and have a deck of cards each. The race! Alternatively, rename it *Friendly Solitaire* and take it in turns to make a move. Both these mods will provide at least twice the fun as the original game.

TF: *Amnesia*.

OH: One player could be tasked with freaking the other dude out as he wanders about. You'd be a presence in the game, but never shown explicitly, a bit like... um... the wind, or a D&D Dungeon Master. You could keep the ghostly player anonymous to make it extra freaky. People assume that multiplayer games can never be scary or atmospheric but once more developers begin to explore narrative-driven MP, I think that'll change.

They've torn their faces off
But who won? Let us know at *www.pcgamer.com/forum*

TF: All right, that sounds pretty cool. OK, counter-examples have failed, back to rational argument. What I object to is the expectation that singleplayer games *must* have multiplayer, as if it's a standard feature or a natural partner to the solo experience. When really, both sides of our argument have been about how fundamentally different they are.

Small developers in particular shouldn't feel obliged to spend resources they don't have trying to make something that ends up being a bad fit for their game and is just deserted within weeks of release anyway.

OH: It's important for developers to balance their resources during development, yes. Take *Spelunky* – Derek Yu originally made his indie with minimal resources and kept it as a solo experience. But *Spelunky HD*? Yu had the opportunity, and the resources, to implement a multiplayer component so he jumped at the chance. And made a better game as a result.

TF: There are certainly examples where it works, but I'm dreading the day when Bethesda feel multiplayer is an obligatory feature for the next *Elder Scrolls*. So much of the appeal of that game, and others like it, depends on a world you can truly have significance in. If they have to also make a game people can play together – God forbid an MMO – it may no longer make commercial sense to put all that effort into the singleplayer.

OH: The tiniest slice of online functionality in *Skyrim* could make the world seem more alive without diluting the central role of the player. Let me send unwanted items to my friends, not just NPCs. Or let me pay other players an hourly fee to control one of my companions, like in *Fable 2*.

TF: Dammit, that sounds fun too. Come on, Owen, you're the ridiculous straw man in this debate, I'm meant to win by default! Stop having good ideas. We can't get to the end of this argument and conclude that all games must have multiplayer.

I want to see your ideas given room to become their own games. They can cash in on the name of a singleplayer game, but the two aren't modes of the same thing, and I hope we don't end up forcing them to be.

OH: TEH MOAR PLAYERS TEH BETTER!

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Naga

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INCOMING

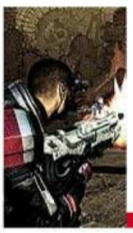
3 MONTHS AWAY

SYNDICATE
Starbreeze's futuristic shooter lets you live your dream of working for a major corporation and executing aggressive takeovers of other people's brains. Expect trenchcoats and dubstep.

Release FEBRUARY 24

RIDGE RACER UNBOUNDED
A full-featured track editor and widespread destruction make this arcade racer one to watch. It's by Bugbear, the folks behind the original *FlatOut* games.

Release MARCH 9



MASS EFFECT 3
Shepard's last stand is almost upon us. Defend the galaxy from the Reapers in the singleplayer campaign or team-up with friends for four player online co-op. Should be a spectacular finish.

Release MARCH 9

PROTOTYPE 2
Over the top open-world ultraviolence featuring three huge chunks of post-apocalyptic New York. Hunt for original protagonist Alex Mercer as a new, even more powerful character.

Release APRIL 2

RISEN 2: DARK WATERS
Pirate-themed free-roaming RPG sequel. Battle sea monsters and corsairs in the search for the brilliantly named Gregory-Emmanuel Steel Beard.

Release APRIL 27

6 MONTHS AWAY

MAX PAYNE 3
To beard or not to beard, that's the question in Rockstar's sequel to the original bullet-time shooter. Max fights his way through South America in a tale of haircuts and revenge.

Release MAY

SNIPER ELITE V2
World War II stealth action with a focus on preparation and realistic ballistic physics. Set during the fall of Berlin, a slow-mo kill cam shows off your best shots in gruesome, organ-puncturing detail.

Release MAY

DIRT SHOWDOWN
Destructive off-road racing spin-off of Codemaster's rally driving series. A mix of straight racing, destruction derby, and freeform stunt courses. Online ranking keeps things competitive.

Release MAY

TERA
Fantasy MMO with real-time twitch combat and a political system that grants players control of territories and whole continents. It's pretty, too, being based on the Unreal Engine.

Release MAY

DARKSIDERS II
What comes after war? Death, obviously. Brawl, explore and puzzle-solve as the most to-the-point Horseman of the Apocalypse. Looks a bit like the excellent *Legacy of Kain* games.

Release JUNE

9+ MONTHS AWAY

BIOSHOCK INFINITE
Looking for a challenge? Fight through the flying city of Columbia in 1999 mode, with ramped up difficulty and meaningful character progression in the manner of the FPSes of yesteryear.

Release 2012

TOMB RAIDER
A series reboot sees a young Lara Croft stranded on a mysterious Japanese island populated by savages. A greater emphasis on survival promises to bring *Tomb Raider* back to its roots.

Release 2012

FAR CRY 3
Do battle with madness itself on an island paradise gone horribly wrong. The series' signature free-roaming gunplay returns alongside a refined narrative and some impressive performances.

Release 2012

PREY 2
Become a bounty hunter in a vast alien metropolis in this open-world shooter that combines *Deus Ex*'s open-ended missions with *Mirror's Edge*'s movement and *Mass Effect*'s style.

Release 2012

HITMAN: ABSOLUTION
Agent 47's new toys include *Batman*-style instinct vision and slow-motion gunplay. Everything we've seen so far has been heavy on action, but we're assured that it won't all be linear.

Release 2012

SLIPPED!

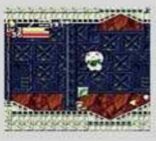
Diablo III
Blizzard won't let their isometric loot-'em-up out of beta until all the fat has been trimmed away. A recent set of changes to itemisation and class balance saw the game punted out of a prospective spring release, sadly.

CAN'T WAIT?

YOU CAN PLAY THESE GREAT GAMES RIGHT NOW

Skyrim
Modders are continuing to tweak and improve what was already one of the best games on the PC. Big, epic, cold.

Batman: Arkham City
The Dark Knight's second outing is a funfair of crime-solving, man-punching brilliance.



Cave Story +
The definitive version of this marvellous 2D indie adventure. The successor to console classics like *Metroid* and *Castlevania*.

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Gamers vs SOPA

The gaming community rises to save the internet from anti-piracy legislation

The games industry has always struggled to find ways to combat piracy without punishing legitimate players. Restrictive DRM is a familiar and frustrating part of being a gamer – but it doesn't compare to the danger posed by policies recently considered by the US government.

Under the now notorious Stop Online Piracy and Protect Intellectual Property acts, legislators would have unprecedented ability to shut down any site accused of copyright infringement, blocking IP addresses and removing them from search engines. Under this regime, a funny *Battlefield* video uploaded without EA's permission could result in all YouTube being taken down.

A number of developers, including Epic Games, 38 Studios, and Trion Worlds made their opposition to the bill public despite their membership of the pro-SOPA Entertainment Software Association. Red 5 Studios took things a step further, shutting down *Firefall*'s beta servers for a day, withdrawing from the ESA-run E3, and setting up League for Gamers, an anti-SOPA movement.

Mojang, makers of *Minecraft*, also joined in a day of blackouts that included Wikipedia, reddit and BoingBoing. "No sane person can be for SOPA," Notch told us. "Sacrificing freedom of speech for the benefit of corporate profit is abominable and disgusting."

Notch also took part in the Stop SOPA/PIPA Game Jam, a rapid development contest hosted by Ludum Dare. The jam saw the creation of dozens of games, including Richard Perrin's heartfelt *Delete* and *Super SOPA Bros*, a Mario remake with any potentially infringing imagery replaced with a black box. All of the contest's entries can be found at *bit.ly/ludumsopa*.

These protests worked. SOPA was withdrawn in late January and PIPA was shelved shortly afterwards. The ESA also renounced its support for the bill, and pushed – along with the White House – for a better-considered set of policies. The clear message sent by gamers, the games industry, and the broader internet community played a major part in achieving this result, but it's not over. Piracy still exists, and with it the threat of authoritarian countermeasures. It's more important than ever to stay vocal about our right to a free internet. ■

Chris Thursten

DARK DEMANDS

PORT COMMUNITY CALLS FOR *DARK SOULS* ON PC

Console RPG *Dark Souls* won hearts and minds for its uncompromising difficulty and novel online features, where players can scrawl messages to one another on the landscape. With its steep learning curve, technical depth and wealth of secrets, it couldn't be more of a PC game if it came with a code wheel and a map. When a representative from publishers Namco Bandai suggested that players should self-organise if they wanted to see a PC version, the resulting petition passed 50,000 signatures in only three days. **CT**

SMOOTH LANDING

TECH *X-PLANE*'S ENGINE TO AUTOPILOT REAL AIRCRAFT

Flight sim *X-Plane*'s physics model is so robust that creator Austin Meyer claims it could be used to land actual aircraft in emergencies. He's building the tech into his own custom-built plane, and will be testing it over a series of flights in the coming months. "You can have an engine failure or a pilot failure," he explains. "Hit this button and the plane will use artificial intelligence to land itself." So easy, a child could do it. Let's hope they never have to. **CT**

LOL OF THE MONTH

SW:TOR'S SAFETY DANCE

It was a sad day when BioWare squashed *The Old Republic*'s funniest exploit. For a time, the social animation /getdown (as opposed to /dance and its more graphic cousin /clubdance) interrupted the wind-up on bosses' special attacks, effectively mesmerising them into placid vulnerability. Imbalanced, yes, but a touching reminder that violence isn't the only answer. See a video of the bug in action at *bit.ly/torgetdown*. **CT**

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PC GAMER **Special Report**

Simulations allow soldiers to rehearse combat scenarios and test their reactions in emergency situations.

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Gaming on the front lines

The growing role of the games industry in military life

Playing at soldiers has always been a pillar of the games industry. From *Arma*'s simulation to *Mass Effect*'s fantasy via the heightened realities of *Battlefield* and *Call of Duty*, war is the motivating force that drives the development of ever more impressive graphics and physics engines.

Just as the necessities of actual conflict have driven innovations in medicine and communications, so the technology developed to present conflict for entertainment leads to deeper and more immersive games.

In fact, the money spent making mass-market shooters far exceeds any government budget for the development of its own training simulators. It's for this reason that the UK's Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (Dstl) make an ongoing effort to assess commercial gaming technology for use by the military. Project KITE – the Knowledge Integration and Test Environment – looks at the latest games to find new and more effective ways of training soldiers.

"By the nature of our interest, many of these are games from the FPS genre," explains Andrew Poulter, technical lead on KITE. "We are also very interested in flight simulation, as you might imagine, especially products at the high-fidelity end of the market." In the past, researchers at KITE have worked with *Virtual Battlespace 2*, a comprehensive military sim based on *Arma* and created by Bohemia Interactive. The software allows soldiers to rehearse combat scenarios and test their reactions in emergency situations, such as a convoy coming under threat from a roadside bomb.

"The software allows soldiers to rehearse combat scenarios and test their reactions"

Chris says...
As gamers we're all familiar with the idea that games impart experience as well as knowledge. Military use of gaming tech is just the start – expect more virtual training programmes to emerge in the years to come, from medicine to police work.

Imparting this kind of theoretical experience – what Poulter calls "training the brain" – is something that games excel at. Situations can be built quickly, and terrain and opposing forces can be adapted to suit a specific theatre of war. "The flexibility of simulations like *Virtual Battlespace 2* has allowed units to rapidly practise a wide range of realistic scenarios and develop their decision-making skills," he says.

In the past, these skills have been assessed through pen and paper examinations; simulators are being introduced as a practical and immersive counterpart.

Many soldiers are also gamers, and as gaming technology advances there's a need to update training software to stay on top of the curve. If a simulation can't convince someone used to high-end FPS gaming, some of its impact is lost. "It's important that the trainee is immersed in what they are doing," says Poulter. "Getting them to suspend their

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disbelief while they are doing representative work is key to the success of these simulations." To this end, KITE works with the industry to adapt engines such as *CryEngine 3*, which is currently in use by the US Army for their Dismounted Soldier Training System.

The initial work of turning a graphics engine into a military simulator is undertaken by the games industry, with some content and simulation dynamics work subsequently done in-house at Dstl. In particular, extensive effort is undertaken to ensure the veracity of AI and ballistic modelling which, with a few exceptions, tends to be sub-par in commercial games. "Graphical fidelity can be very important, but it's not the only part of the simulation that needs to be right," Poulter stresses. "If the physics or dynamics are wrong, then it really doesn't matter how good the software looks."

When these elements come together, however, the result is a realistic simulation that makes military training more efficient and less reliant on costly live-fire exercises. KITE are currently building systems to help soldiers identify different vehicles on the battlefield – the use of commercial graphics and physics technology allows this to be achieved quickly to a high degree of accuracy. Beyond mouse-and-keyboard simulations, advances in interface technology like the Kinect are also being trialled: the motion-sensing camera is currently being tested as a mapping tool to capture three-dimensional data about environments.

As technology advances, the scope for what can be simulated grows and virtual training becomes a bigger and bigger part of military life. Work is underway to provide access to simulations on mobile devices, allowing troops to practise wherever they are. Likewise, Dstl are investigating cross-disciplinary simulations that combine, for example, forward air control with flight and artillery simulation – class-based cooperative multiplayer taken to its logical extreme.

The fact that games are entertainment and that many people play military sims for pleasure hasn't been lost on the Ministry of Defence. In fact, this kind of enthusiasm is encouraged. "It's certainly our intention that troops will enjoy the training, and so will want to do more training in their own time," says Poulter. "This is already happening: servicemen enjoy using the simulations, and see that they are getting benefit from using them. If people want to do something, they're more likely to learn and do well."

Project KITE also pays attention to the reward systems that developers use to keep gamers playing, and are investigating ways to integrate similar ideas into military training. "So-called 'gamification' is something we are looking very seriously at: taking advantage of the competitive nature of many in the military to want to do better and outperform their team-mates," explains Poulter. "The gamer paradigm works well to support this."

For the games industry, this is a significant vote of confidence. Both the technology and the psychology of gaming are increasing in importance, and with this comes a broader understanding of gaming's role in society. For Project KITE, though, more realistic simulation simply means better-prepared troops that are safer and more capable in a warzone. "We've been told that there are guys alive today because of the pre-deployment training they did using these simulations" Poulter says. "At the end of the day, this is more than a game; it's life or death." ■

Chris Thursten

FULL SPECTRUM WARRIOR Training the modern soldier

Simulations ensure that military training is safer and more efficient.

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Absolution is more cinematic than previous *Hitman* games.

HITMAN: ABSOLUTION

NEW INFO Agent 47 returns for another job, and this time it's serious

A hitman hits men for a living, but Agent 47's enemies hit women. IO's most recent showing of their next *Hitman* game opens with a scene of masked men shooting an unarmed nun as she lies crawling, bleeding and screaming on the floor of an invaded orphanage. It's a nasty introduction to a game that's got meaner and darker since its previous outing. *Blood Money* had moments of bleak humour and silliness; *Absolution* has detailed slow-motion shots of Agent 47 slamming a fire axe into the side of someone's knee.

As well as bleaker, it also seems narrower. The two missions that developers IO have shown so far from the game feature wide corridors strung together. Where *Absolution*'s predecessor dropped Agent 47 into a wide open space that necessitated backtracking and planning, the new game's library and orphanage come in bite sized chunks, each made up of spacious strips to be overcome before moving on to the next area. "We want a very cinematic experience," says game director Tore Blystad. But *Blood Money*'s joy was in freedom – the ability to go anywhere, and to inject a horrible poisonous mixture into any neck you chose.

That change is enough to get *Blood Money* fans across the world nervously clutching their Silverballers. Blystad is at pains to tell us not to worry: "The *Hitman* games have always been about choice, and very much so with *Absolution*. Everything is designed with choice in mind. We're not scripting things so you have to play through in a linear fashion." The mission I saw reinforced this statement, with the man at Hitman's helm showing two very different ways to approach the same section of game. Both begin with the dead nun.

> **"*Hitman* games have always been about choice, and very much so with *Absolution*"**

The first victim is a nun because Agent 47 is in an orphanage and dressed as a priest, for reasons developers IO don't properly explain. He's halfway through a mission in said orphanage, infiltrating the building to extract a girl rather than to hit hitmen. But depending on how you play *Hitman: Absolution*, that second action can happily be a by-product of the first.

The first approach is psychotic, and involves the fire axe. The scene opens with the nun murder in the orphanage. Agent 47 is relaxing on the roof of an unpowered lift, the nun spluttering her bloody last as the perpetrators waltz off into the main building to find the girl. Hoisting himself up from the lift shaft to the corridor, 47 overhears whimpering from the next room. There's a security guard being trussed up by stocking-headed thugs; he's shot in the knees for not knowing where the girl is. See? Bleaker.

As six-year-old kids and people who kill people for a living know, the only way to stop violence is with more violence: 47 grabs a fire axe from the wall and wades into plain sight. He swings the axe towards

READ ME
PUBLISHER
IO Interactive
DEVELOPER
Square Enix
LINK
hitman.com

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Use Instinct to slow time and it's like shooting (masked) fish in a barrel.

Sneaky-47 likes to hide his tracks. And corpses.

Emotion plays no part in the hitman's life...

the chest of his first victim, the game immediately popping into a slow-motion mode. Agent 47 has lost his innate clumsiness in *Absolution* – the developers repeatedly refer to him as "a weapon" – and his attacks are graceful and QTE-like. The first man falls when the axe is driven horrifically into the side of his leg; the second goes down after he stumbles and gets it embedded into the top of his skull.

Still 47 pushes on, bullets ripping through his purloined priest outfit as the last torturer standing opens fire on him. He ducks behind a piano for a second – showcasing the game's new cover system – before popping out and twatting the guy in the chest with twelve inches of metal. The pop to cover feels natural for this approach: this is *Hitman* as darkly deranged third-person shooter. Captors offed, 47 speaks to the tied-up and bleeding security guard. Apparently he keeps a shotgun in the chapel downstairs. Guess where psycho-47 is going next?

The second approach is perfection. Starting in the same lift shaft with the same nun-ny death, the second Agent 47 creeps behind the murderers until he's under a bookshelf. The cover system hides 47's shiny pate behind convenient objects, and a standard crouch will put him at a similar height. Blystad mentions that players should feel comfortable moving around out of cover, knowing they're out of sight even when they're out of hard cover.

And when they are forced with their back

"The sneaky version of 47 is either callous or sensible, depending on your viewpoint"

to the wall, they're not constrained by invisible barriers: *Absolution*'s bookshelves, sofas, and 3ft-high walls have 'soft' edges, letting 47 traverse their planes without stickiness, hopefully reducing the frustration of detection.

The sneaky version of 47 is either more callous or more sensible, depending on your viewpoint, leaving the orphanage's torture victim to his eventual fate. The poor bastard screams his last as 47 opens the door and sneaks out of the room, closing it behind him as the room's occupants are focused on their kill. He's out and through in total silence.

This Agent 47 is able to make limited use of his environment to aid his stealthy cause. Where his maniacal alter-ego nabbed an axe from the wall, sneaky 47 picks up a vase from a table. Blystad argues that "previous *Hitmans* were very predictable for the player, and there was a very strongly directed way the levels were designed". He wants *Absolution* to feel more organic, with 47 able to get out of trouble by using whatever he's got to hand.

Now 47 is into the next area, semi-trapped in cover. He's not under immediate threat from the level's guards, but their patrol routes have conspired to pin him in place. He can either wait for a fortuitous crossing of paths to create a convenient blind spot or, even better, heft the vase into a non-essential part of the room and scurry onwards while distracted guards investigate it. He does the latter, with the room's occupants immediately directing their attentions vase-wards.

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"Shhhhh! Hush little baby, don't you cry... "

They don't put gas canisters there for decoration, you know.

"That's for taking the Lord's name in vain!"

Detection is less binary than it was in previous *Hitman* games. Players are notified of guard suspicion by a circular splodge close to a shooter's hit notifier. AI characters piqued by the presence of a crouching baldy in their midst cause spikes in the circle – let that spike grow too large and you're busted. It feels more organic than *Blood Money*'s unpredictable suspicion bar, more analogue. And psycho-47 doesn't care for it.

He's too busy popping shotgun cartridges into the stomachs of his foes. After making his way down to the blood-smeared chapel, psycho-47 finds himself behind a glass door, eavesdropping on the invading thugs' leader's briefing. They're here to find the same girl as he is. IO wouldn't explain exactly why she is important, but it's likely to be something to do with Diana Burnwood.

Burnwood was Agent 47's handler for his earlier career, and one of *Absolution*'s first targets – 47 doesn't let something petty like years of friendship get in the way of his kills. The thugs seem to have another leader outside the orphanage, and the man berating his colleagues behind the glass door doesn't seem to think he'll be happy with their efforts.

Those efforts are diminished further by 47, who springs from behind the door with his shotgun spraying. I didn't get to try out *Absolution*'s shooting, but it looks understandably similar in feel to IO's *Kane and Lynch* series, the camera snapping to

"47 is free to put on the clothes of most people he subdues, giving him a level of immunity"

47's shoulder as his shots tear through soft thugflesh. The boom of the shotgun draws enemies from around the contained area, and corpses pile up in doorways as they come to investigate the noise.

Back on the more sensible side of the tactical divide, a sneakier 47 has to be more careful with his bodies. He catches one behind a thick bookcase, snuffling him to sleep with an insistent "shhh!" before nabbing his clothes, taking him gently by the wrist, and pulling him into a freezer. This is *Absolution* at its most *Blood Money*-esque. Like that game, 47 is free to put on the clothes of most people he subdues, giving him some level of immunity when wandering around in the open.

Previously, donning an outfit would give you near-invisibility, with the game conveniently ignoring the fact that your peers would notice when Santa' changes from a short fat man into a 6ft killing machine with a shiny head. Wander *Absolution*'s hallways in someone else's clothes and people will squint at you, trying to work out if you're actually meant to be there.

To counterbalance this, the game is seeded with interactions that let you hide in plain sight. 47 saunters into one of the orphanage's larger rooms dressed in his new clothes. It's stuffed with enemies: most are busy with their own concerns, but one's wandering around. His eyes alight on 47's hairless head, a spike appearing on the suspicion notifier. In response, 47 ducks his head down, suddenly extraordinarily interested in a leaflet stand. The guard

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"Does my gun look big in this?"

"If it's wrong to kill someone for their trousers, then I don't want to be right."

You can save him by shooting everyone, or you can sneak on by. Your choice.

walks past, happy to believe the new guy loves leaflets.

But sneakier assassins won't always have leaflets to hand every time they need to avoid suspicion. Instead, they can dip in to 47's new 'Instinct' bar – this resource is earned by doing good things like avoiding patrols, performing silent takedowns, or getting headshots. Using Instinct in the face of guard suspicion lets 47 cover his face for a second, affecting a stifled yawn or a head rub. It's somewhat artificial, but it does offer a handful of escape opportunities to otherwise perfect players who've put a foot wrong. Harder difficulties shrink the amount of Instinct you gain, making such moves more difficult – especially when it can be used for other vital purposes.

For instance, 47 can use his spare Instinct to fuel a few seconds of Magic Vision, which lets him anticipate patrol routes, picked out on the floor in a line of flames. It's a mechanic that turns Agent 47 from the superhuman to the supernatural, but it fits in well with his suite of abilities. *Blood Money* forced dedicated players to watch and wait to learn patrol routes, wasting time to hardwire movements into their brain. *Absolution* still has the space to let players on harder difficulty settings use this manual method, but those with less time to burn can spend some of their Instinct to preternaturally anticipate routes and come up with a plan.

IO demonstrated another Instinct usage during 47's time in the orphanage – one that's better suited to a less cautious playthrough. With his signature Silverballer pistol in hand, 47 pops into an occupied room and stops time for a moment. During this pause, he starts to queue up headshots, pumping a few spare bullets into exposed gas canisters in convenient locations around the room. As the shots rattle off into faces and necks the camera follows, giving a gorily cinematic viewpoint of each messy kill. Once the dust settles and the blood has finished spraying the walls, the room is clear and 47's Instinct metre has been drained.

"Using Instinct in the face of guard interest allows 47 to cover his face for a second"

From what IO have shown so far, *Absolution*'s level design is sniper rifle-focused rather than machine gun-expansive. That will scare fans of the previous game, but Blystad argues that as the game gets closer to launch, IO will start to show the open environments and inventive murder tools that the series is known for. Blystad assures us that there's no need to worry, as he and his company know their audience: "Our hardcore fans, the first thing they do is turn around on the spot and go in the opposite direction to see if it's possible. We're trying our best to accommodate every conceivable way of playing the game."

Even with such a tight play area, the range of choice open to the player's own Agent 47 – be he careful, psychotic or any of the shades of grey in between – make *Absolution* look like a comfortingly professional job.

Rich McCormick

Release AUTUMN

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Your car isn't going to look this good for very long.

The *Unbounded* team are a group of lawless, badass racers. Join them.

Found an area that's off limits? Crash into it until you get through.

RIDGE RACER UNBOUNDED

FIRST LOOK Build your city and tear it down again in this arcade racer.

Police cars stampede like antelope across the freeway, careening into oncoming traffic and riding up on crash barriers. Behind them, ploughing implacably onwards, is an angry red truck. I am driving the truck.

To say that *Ridge Racer: Unbounded* encourages aggressive driving would be an understatement. Released by Bugbear Entertainment, developers of the original *FlatOut* games, it represents a thorough reworking of the previously console-exclusive arcade racer.

The series' signature drifting simulation features only peripherally in the Frag Attack mode I'm currently playing. As the timer ticks down, I swing my truck from side to side, sending police cars flying, bursting into balls of flame. Each one crushed earns me a few seconds on the clock, and a boost to the power bar that periodically enables me to surge forward, wrecking everything in my path. I'm chiefly sticking to the wrong side of the road: the hapless oncoming traffic neither slows me down nor earns me any points, but I can't see what else it could be there for.

Frag Attack isn't the sum of the game, but does capture the vehicular carnage at its core. Even the more traditional race mode, Dominate, encourages you to crash into anything that isn't nailed down on your way to the finish line. *Unbounded* is so named for the fact that its drivers are unrestricted by sense, physics, or respect for property. Want to drive smoothly and cleanly? Forget it. A delicate drift around a corner earns you power, and that power lets you open shortcuts by ramming headlong into obstacles, shooting forward in a cone of red light, rubble and shrapnel. The first time you take the scenic route through the walls of a mausoleum, *Unbounded*'s mission statement becomes more or less clear.

> **"Frag Attack isn't the sum of the game, but it captures the vehicular carnage at its core"**

The vehicles feel weighty enough that slamming them into walls isn't a concern, but it only takes a moment's miscalculation – or the aggressive attention of another driver – to trigger a spin-out. Crashes are rendered from first principles, without a reliance on canned animations. This means you get twirling, flaming hunks of twisted wreckage sent soaring across the track as the game shifts into an appreciative slow-motion panning shot. Producer Joonas Laakso says his favourite game is *Burnout 3*, and its not difficult to figure out what he thought was the best thing about it.

In Dominate, respawns are quick and crashes are an inevitable but recoverable setback. In Survival mode, however, every racer gets a single life. This changes the rhythm of play completely, encouraging considered risk-taking and precise timing. Firing off your boost at the wrong moment can see you wreck yourself, even without the help of your competitors. It's necessary to check yourself before this happens.

READ ME

PUBLISHER
Namco Bandai

DEVELOPER
Bugbear Entertainment

LINK
ridgeracer.com

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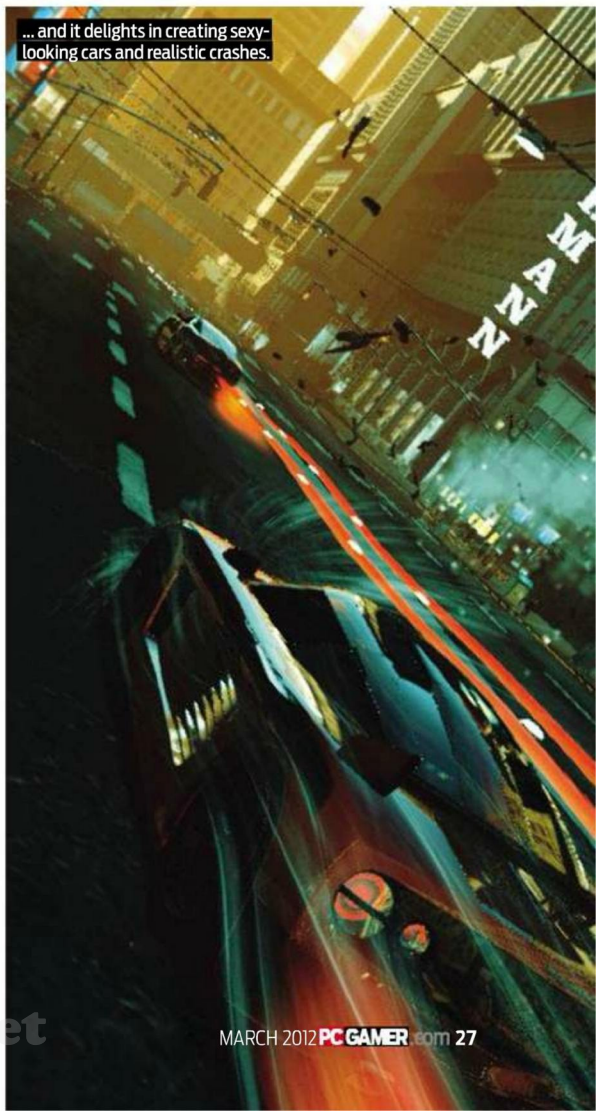
Take a relaxing trip to Shatter Bay... and smash other cars off the road.

This destruction-focused racer is petrol-head heaven...

[redacted] for buying a yellow car.



... and it delights in creating sexy-looking cars and realistic crashes.

The other modes are designed to teach the basic skills needed to succeed in the core game: Frag Attack for aggression and Drift Challenge for, well, sliding around corners in order to communicate how damn cool you are.

It's important that these mechanics are solid, because *Unbounded* comes with its own track editor that enables players to compete on whatever kind of course they feel like making. This feature came about due to a desire to add value to what is otherwise a straightforward experience. "The time has passed for this kind of simple arcade offering," explains Laakso. "We felt like we really needed to offer something extra."

At the most basic level, constructing a track is a case of laying out blocks – each a tiny clump of city with a predetermined racing line – on an eight-by-eight grid. As long as your course has a starting line and loops back on itself, you can build whatever you like within the confines of a budget.

That budget is determined by the available texture memory, and Bugbear are willing to consider increasing this for PCs that can handle it. In order to upload a track for online use, you will first have to prove that you can beat it yourself. This establishes the par time for the course, and confirms that the track is valid – which is essential, given *Unbounded*'s persistent ranking system.

Simply getting a track up and running is as easy as playing a game of *Pipe Mania*, which the basic editor strongly resembles – albeit with roads and cars instead of pipes and goo. For the dedicated few, however, an advanced mode will allow for the placement and minute adjustment of individual track elements on the fly– and yes, it will support mouse and keyboard on the PC.

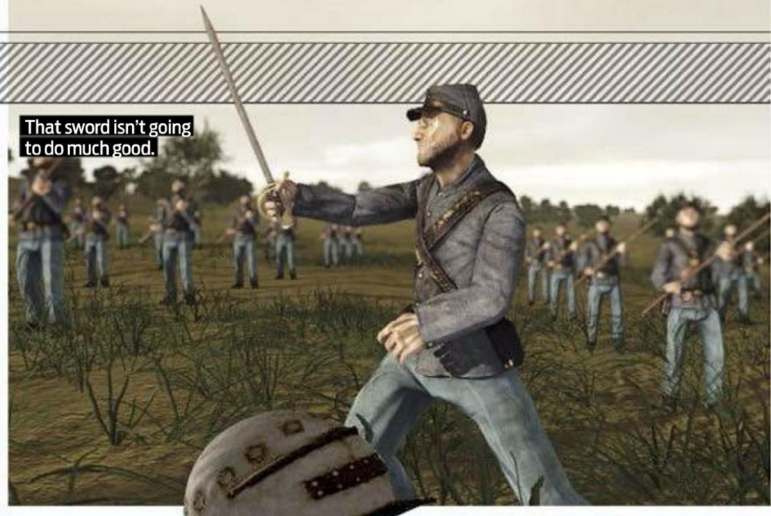
It's possible for the same repeating block to be manipulated into a whole race course, with custom-tooled barriers, jumps, and physics defying loop-the-loops. It's incredibly flexible, Laakso claims, which he subsequently demonstrates by driving headlong through a stack of explosive barrels and a giant plywood dinosaur. As you do.■

Chris Thursten

Release MARCH 2012

WorldMags.net

The South *really* want to leave the Union.



That sword isn't going to do much good.

Making the fight to end slavery fun.

GETTYSBURG ARMOURED WARFARE

NEW INFO It's the heavy metal version of the American Civil War.

The real problem with the American Civil War wasn't the threat of dismantling the United States, it was that the guns were rubbish. It's hard to make a third-person action game – even one that's part strategy game – in a setting where the primary weapon could take minutes to reload. The solution, as with so many of life's problems, comes from time-travelling racists.

Armoured Warfare is set in the Civil War era, but people have travelled back in time and delivered modern(ish) weaponry to the Confederate South. That means their infantry carry machineguns, drive tanks and fly Zeppelins, in a time better known for horses and cannons.

"I was trying to get this military simulation contract," explains designer Danny Green. Green is the game's only full-time developer, doing all the programming himself and using contractors for the art. "It fell through, but I took the technology and I had a game called *Armoured Warfare* I was making. Then Paradox wanted me to do a civil war game." Green convinced Paradox to mix the two ideas.

It's not the only way that the game is a hybrid. *Gettysburg* is built around 64-player multiplayer battles. Players start each round by selecting a squad of units that mixes air, ground vehicles and infantry. Then they give simple move and shoot commands to their squads, who must capture control points and defeat the enemy. From high above, battles are chaotic and spectacular.

"The armies of the Confederate South carry machineguns, drive tanks and fly Zeppelins"

For finer control, players can take direct control of each individual unit and play them from a third-person perspective. You launch the Zeppelin's cannons and fire the infantry's Gatling guns yourself. Unlike the distant strategy view, in third-person you can tell that this is a one-man, small budget project. The terrain is a little lower resolution than we're used to, and the machineguns don't look that exciting.

Gettysburg: Armoured Warfare is still incredible. Green is a self-taught programmer, yet he's written a functional, quite pretty 3D engine and networking code that can handle 64 players, each directing multiple units.

Mid-game, Green demonstrates the World Editor that will ship with the game by pressing a button and hopping straight in to it. He paints the terrain to create mountains, moves a slider to add trees and water, and puts down some buildings to start building a city. He presses another button and goes back to playing.

The game was originally going to be free-to-play, but the number of hats required proved too large for a small project. Instead, it will cost around £7, with "cheap" DLC packs released afterwards similar to fellow Paradox game *Magicka*. Low-fi, action-*Total War*? That's an enticing prospect. ■

Graham Smith

READ ME

PUBLISHER
Paradox

DEVELOPER
Radioactive Software

LINK
bit.ly/gettyrts

Release MARCH

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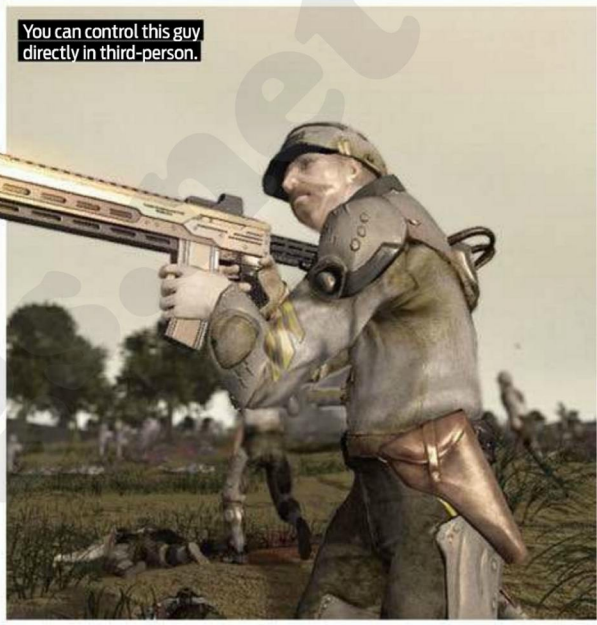
"I wish they'd brought back some Segways."

Wait, what time are those time travellers from?

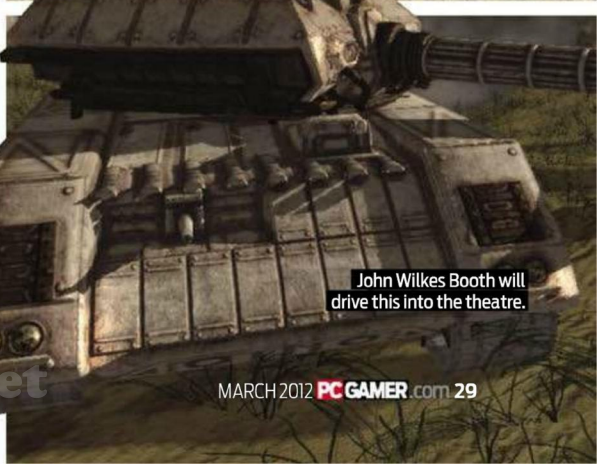


You can control this guy directly in third-person.

Old tech made new: arm-mounted Gatling guns.

Yeah, Abraham Lincoln is totally screwed.

That flag has the wrong number of stars on it.



John Wilkes Booth will drive this into the theatre.

WorldMags.net

Why is it called a longbow, anyway?

Don't laugh at their tights.

England, yesterday.

WAR OF THE ROSES

PLAYED IT Fight for the throne of England in Battlefield 1442.

George Plantagenet, 1st Duke of Clarance, is popularly thought to have been executed by drowning in a barrel of wine.

"I was not that into 15th century English history before I started this," says Marten Stormdal, lead designer of Paradox's large-scale melee multiplayer game, "but reading up on the conflict is crazy... Also you don't have to explain why the red team is fighting the white team."

The wars were fought between the Lancaster and York families, whose heraldic badges were a red and white rose respectively. Most members of both families died in the many battles, double-crosses and executions that followed, before they finally just married each other to end the whole thing. Think A Game of Thrones, only without the dragons.

For Paradox's game, think *Battlefield*.

The map I play is set in a castle. Countryside sprawls beyond. Volleys of flaming arrows crash onto the battlements from the treeline, and castle buildings are already on fire.

These maps are huge, set in forests, villages and castles. If you're on a 64-player server, you'll get to whack the crap out of each other with longbows, crossbows, maces, lances, axes and swords on the full thing. If fewer medieval mentalists are available, the level will shrink, shutting castle gates to trap players within courtyards for more immediate battles.

"The hope is to avoid the messy flailing of *Skyrim* by slowing attacking swings"

Melee combat is mouse controlled. Click and shift your mouse upwards, and your soldier swings his sword from above. Click and shift your mouse to the right and he swings from the right. It's smooth and intuitive. The hope is to avoid the messy flailing of *Skyrim* by slowing attacking swings, and making parrying movements almost instant. It feels better than any other multiplayer melee I've ever played.

If you want to trample soldiers under hoof, you can hop on a horse. Horseback combat works in the same way as melee, and you'll be formidable against foot soldiers. You're slower to turn though, and a large target for watching archers.

No amount of metal plating will save you from falling from a horse, but developers Fatshark are still spending a lot time on players' light, medium and heavy armour, on the 10+ helmet types, and on the crests that adorn them. There's a reason for that.

To make back their investment, Paradox are hoping to entice players with a hefty game that includes dozens of weapons and 60 perks that unlock abilities and let you customise your play style. But they're also planning a deluge of paid-for post-release content. Think new crests. Think hat attachments, such as fancy plumes or absurd ornaments. We were shown one helmet that has a squatting gold fox on top of it. It's brilliant, and I'm already hoping for a microtransactional Barrel of Wine to drown my opponents in. ■

Graham Smith

READ ME
PUBLISHER Paradox Interactive
DEVELOPER Fatshark
LINK bit.ly/pcgroses

Release SUMMER

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MICROSOFT FLIGHT

FIRST LOOK The PC's oldest sim series returns, free as a bird.

When Microsoft closed *Flight Simulator X* developers Aces Studio in 2009, many wondered if we'd seen the last of the world's longest-running flight sim series. Despite the announcement of *Microsoft Flight*, it's still a valid question – a free-to-play game with a focus on accessibility isn't the first thing that springs to mind when you think about the future of realistic aircraft piloting.

Flight, which is being produced internally at Microsoft Game Studios, has been built from scratch and takes little from its predecessor – not even its name. "I think the word 'simulator' was part of what kept *Flight* a niche product," explains Joshua Howard, the game's executive producer. "We dropped it as a way of saying that *Flight* is a whole world of experiences, and it's for much broader audiences than those who commonly associate with the word simulator."

READ ME

PUBLISHER
Microsoft Game Studios

DEVELOPER
In-house

LINK
microsoft.com/games/flight

The game is an attempt to bring not only a new audience to flight simulation, but to expand Microsoft's roster of free-to-play games. The two, Howard argues, are a natural fit.

"*Flight* gives me so many opportunities – I can not only present new planes and new ways to fly, I can present new places, I can present new kinds of things to do. The world of aviation is massive, and we can introduce it in incremental steps to a player-base over time and still not have scratched the surface."

"I think the word 'simulator' was part of what kept *Flight* a niche product"

In making *Flight* more accessible, Microsoft have taken care to ensure that the basic flight model is as realistic as it used to be. "Instead of delivering a dumber simulation to begin with," Howard explains, "we still have the hardcore sim underneath, but we've put assists on top to smooth things out. You can fine-tune the experience to be what you want." It's intended that new players will be able to take off and soar around with mouse control immediately, while experienced pilots can disable the assists and head up with a joystick or flight yoke.

The new engine improves over the old in a number of areas, from rendering to physics. Despite the newb-friendly trappings, there's still a comprehensive simulator powering *Flight*. In fact, Howard argues, "it's a more sophisticated flight model and a better looking simulation than there has ever been before." *Flight* is capable of modeling scenarios that its predecessors weren't, such as flat spins.

The game's tutorial begins with an obstacle where a light aircraft – an ICON A5 – must be steered in a slalom course between a row of balloons. The improved physics allows for closer shaves than before. "If you happen to clip a balloon, you'll send the plane into a spin, which if you're careful you can recover from. The previous simulation engine never could have handled that scenario successfully,

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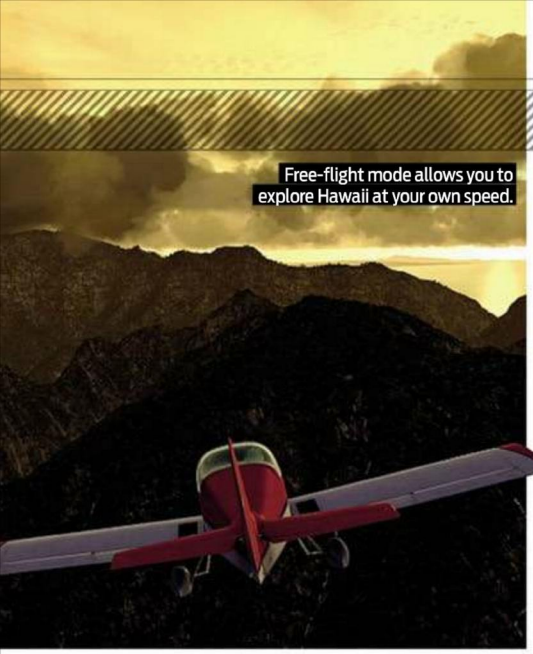
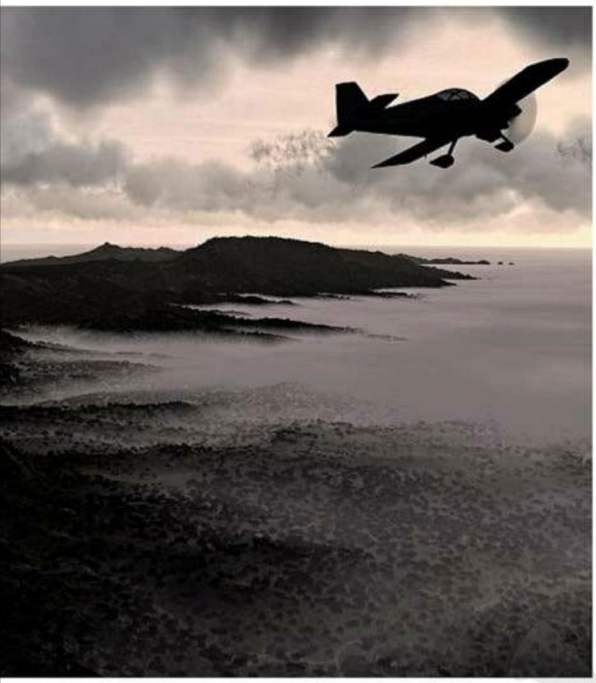
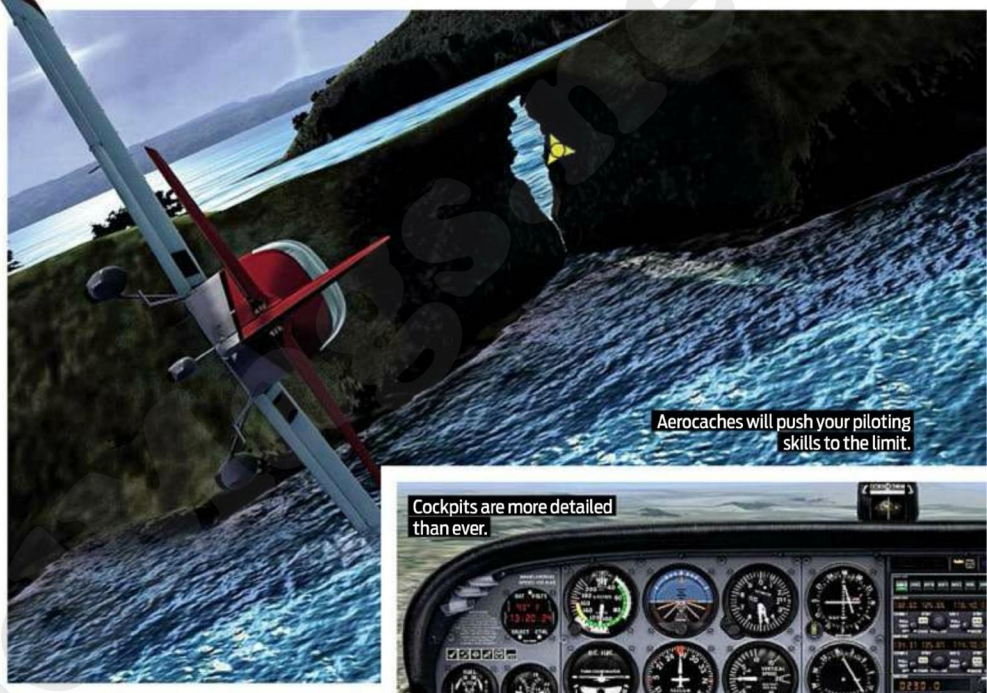

Free-flight mode allows you to explore Hawaii at your own speed.

The new engine models each landing gear individually.




Aerocaches will push your piloting skills to the limit.

Cockpits are more detailed than ever.

Although it's covered in propellers, Hawaii isn't a pilotable aircraft.

Despite appearances, *Flight* isn't hex-based.

never mind with some of the faster, more manoeuverable aircraft."

Beyond the tutorial, time in *Flight* is spent chasing a range of challenges against the game's Hawaiian backdrop. These range from stunt challenges to a 'Gold Rush' mode where players race to find a set amount of coins in an area as quickly as possible.

There's also 'Aerocaching', a system similar to geocaching where pilots search for particular areas on the world map. Aerocaching forms the basis of the game's connected online mode – caches will move around from day to day, and you'll be able to compare your own progress with those of your friends. This service – like the game's marketplace – will be handled through existing Games for Windows Live accounts, and *Flight* will feature achievements.

Comparison between players is grounded in details such as how many landings you've made or the highest g-force you've pulled, rather a single level rating. The decision was made, Howard says, to avoid alienating casual players. "Given the broader appeal of the title, coming right out of the door with super-hardcore ranking system may not be the right move – but one of the advantages of being an online product is if that's the place users want us to go sooner than we might have, we get to deliver that too."

When the free client launches later in the spring, you'll have access to Hawaii, the ICON A5, and a number of Gold Rush and Aerocache challenges including a daily cache that changes every 24 hours. An additional aircraft, the legendary Stearman Model 75, will be made available when you connect your Games for Windows Live account to the game. Beyond that, new aircraft, regions and customisations will have to be bought through the Live Marketplace.

Flight is trying to be all things to all gamers, and it's relying on the universal appeal of flight to pull it off. If it can keep its promise of accessible air-pootling without losing that all-important fidelity, then it could well be the gateway simulator that Microsoft want it to be. ■

Chris Thursten

Release SPRING

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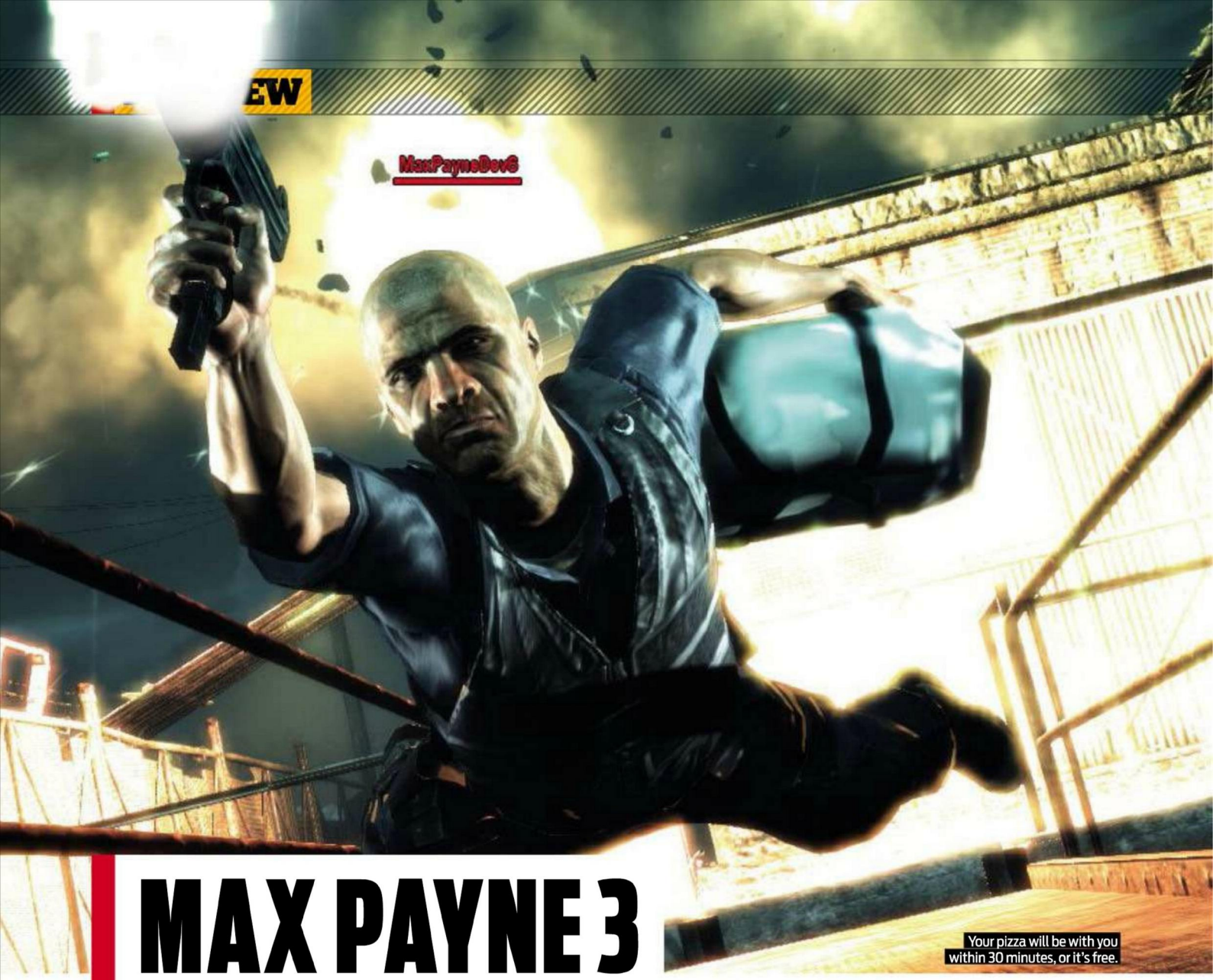

MAX PAYNE 3

Your pizza will be with you within 30 minutes, or it's free.

PLAYED IT Multiplayer is opening Max's world up to some new friends

After ten years of toying with what once seemed impossible, *Max Payne 3* features Bullet Time in multiplayer. Perhaps more impressively, it works really well. Technically, it isn't rocket science – when a player activates the series' iconic slow-mo, anyone who can see them will be caught in it too. Break the line of sight or kill the person using it and you'll return to the land of standard speed.

There's a tendency to panic when things shudder to a crawl unexpectedly, but thankfully there's a safety indicator. If the edge of the screen turns blue, it's being used by an ally in eyeshot. See a tint of red rimming the screen, and you'd better start diving sideways sharpish. Most of the time, it's the shoot-dodge move that triggers it – spending half a bar of Adrenaline to buy a few seconds of bullet-ballet.

READ ME
PUBLISHER Rockstar Games
DEVELOPER In-house
LINK rockstargames.com/maxpayne3

Adrenaline is easily earned by doing all sorts of standard shooter stuff, but dodging too often isn't always wise. Jump straight into a brick wall, and you'll watch your character react appropriately. Aside from leaving yourself open to a conversation between your face and their shotgun, shoot-dodging isn't always the best way you can use your Adrenaline. In addition to an equipment loadout, each custom class can select a 'burst'. The diversity of these

"Adrenaline is earned by doing standard shooter stuff, but dodging too often isn't always wise"

game-changing perks is what makes *Max Payne 3* feel really interesting, letting you change the flow of the game without spawning an army of dogs and helicopters.

The Trigger Happy burst isn't far off the usual fare, letting you spawn progressively better bits of equipment. One bar of Adrenaline gets you armour-piercing ammo, with two you earn a machinegun, and the full three bars nets a tasty grenade launcher. While perfect for the needs of bread-and-butter gunners, I instead fell in love with something very different. The Sneaky burst is an instant favourite, allowing you to temporarily imitate an enemy soldier in progressively more convincing ways. Bullet Time lets you slow time for longer and without diving, whilst Intuition offers increasingly strong intel. Use three bars of Adrenaline at once, and your team will be able to see silhouettes of the enemy across the map – a tactical advantage that would undeniably give Tom Clancy a semi. My favourite of the bunch so far is Paranoia, a burst that makes it harder to identify friend from foe when used with one Adrenaline bar, but gets substantially more fruity when notched up to three. In addition to turning all the names on their screen red, a fully charged Paranoia burst will tempt the enemy team with cash prizes for betrayal; shoot a friend in the back of the head and you can walk away with some extra. Decide you'd rather stay true to your team and you'd better hope that their moral compass points the same way.

There were only five bursts to play with

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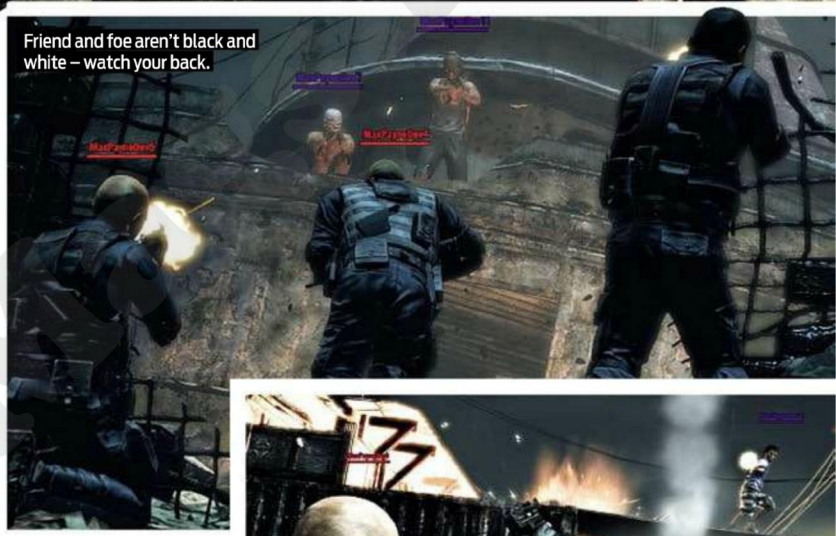
You can't carry grenades *and* flashbangs. Sorry.

Super-classy tats, chap.

You can only carry three weapons – and even that will slow you down.


Friend and foe aren't black and white – watch your back.

so far, but the final game promises around 16. With all the shoot-dodging and bursts being triggered, *Max Payne 3*'s multiplayer quickly gets hectic. Gunfights are mostly conducted in mid-air, which leads to some stunning showdown moments. I leap over crates with suicidal abandon and introduce myself through the medium of broken glass. High ground and windows would usually only provide sniping spots and vision, but the approach in *Max Payne 3* is usually quite different. Spot a man skulking close to the wall beneath your window and it's hard to resist the temptation to hurl your body over their head, peppering their shoulders with a spray of hot lead.

Straight-up deathmatch is available, but *Max Payne 3* seems likely to appeal more to fans of objective-based games. Tying together different game modes with a couple of pieces of narrative string, Gang Wars is likely to be the heart of the multiplayer. The Docks map I played always began with a game type in which we had to seize guns, but the outcome of this match saw the rest pan out differently. The chain of events in one Docks game saw the other team trying to assassinate our best performing player, with their character introduced as the 'leader' of our gang in the match's comic-style intro.

Gang Wars borrows story aspects and characters from the singleplayer campaign, creating branching narratives that usually get wrapped up after five or six rounds. Once you get to each map's finale, your team's performance in earlier rounds will affect your handicap for the team deathmatch showdown.

With 16 players leaping around and taking advantage of sneaky tactics, *Max Payne 3*'s multiplayer feels delightfully bonkers. The cover system works pretty well, but the handling and shooting don't feel as snappy as some of the best third-person shooters. I'll need to try more bursts before forming concrete opinions, but slow-mo shootouts are definitely more fun with friends. As proven by the tireless research of Dr John Woo, horizontal gunfights are much cooler than those that make excessive use of legs. ■

Matt Lees

Stay still after diving and you can shoot from the floor.

Expect Gang Wars to offer up some varied scenarios.

That Dead Island trailer sort of stole Dave's thunder.

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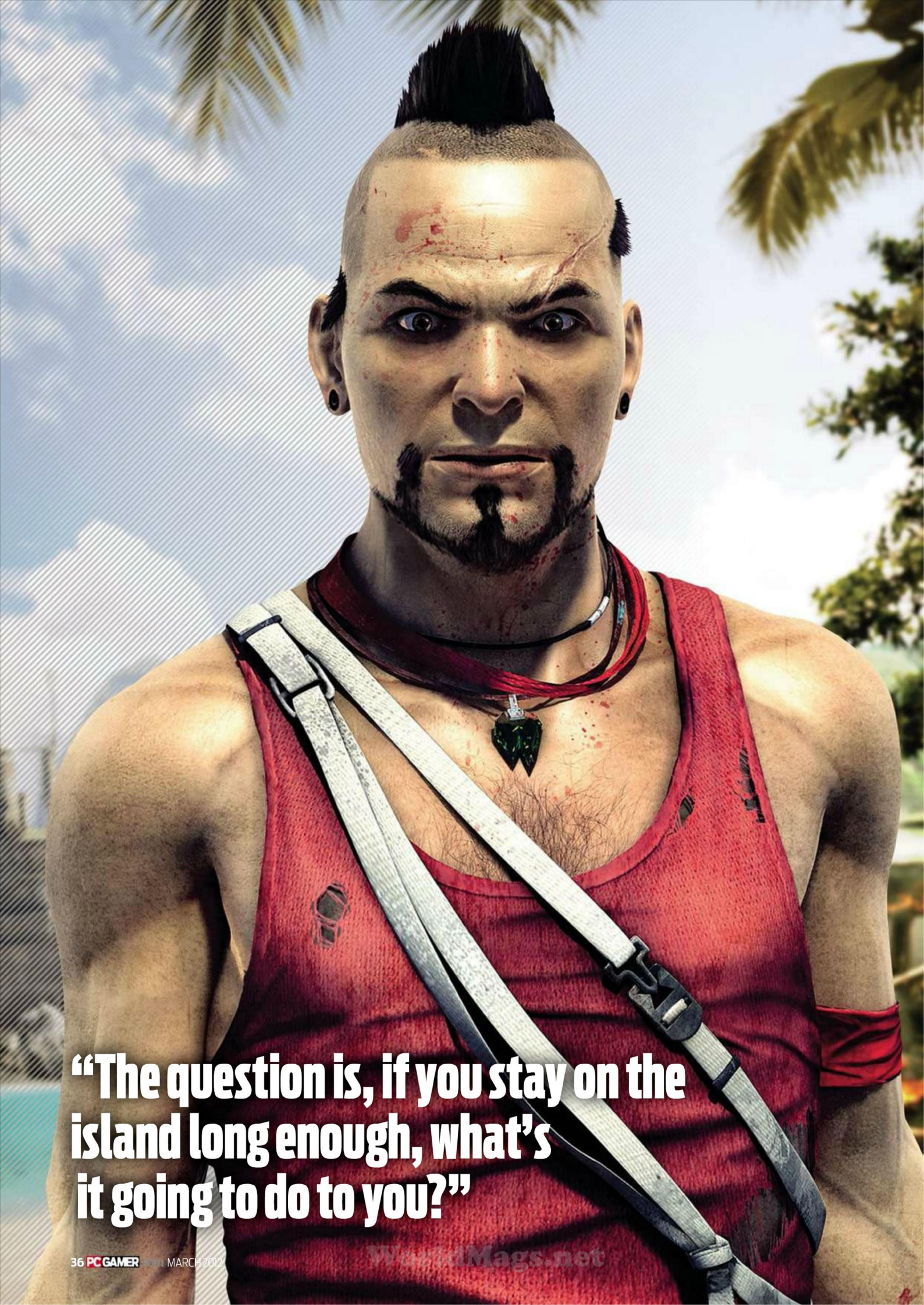

“The question is, if you stay on the island long enough, what’s it going to do to you?”

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PARADISE REGAINED

FAR CRY 3 returns to its palm-shaded, tropical roots. ***By Rich McCormick***

If insanity really is "doing the same thing and expecting shit to change," as Vaas, psychotic killer and mohawk-sporting poster madman of *Far Cry 3* suggested during last year's E3 trailer, then Ubisoft are certifiably sane.

Far Cry 3 looks like the original *Far Cry*. It's got the island setting, it's blessed with the same shimmering blue water and silvery-white sand. Again, you are a lone soul, marooned somewhere that wants to kill you, and again you've got a suite of skills to stop the place doing just that. But dig under the idyllic facade and you'll find something new, something infectious. Ubisoft want to do something different with their third free-roaming shooter, and as our unhinged friend Vaas would say, shit has definitely changed.

To understand the changes, it helps to appreciate the things that have stayed the same. Sitting in a conference room full of journalists in Ubisoft Montreal's labyrinthine offices, my first sight of *Far Cry 3* being played certainly *feels* familiar.

Blue sky. White sand. Our first-person protagonist comes across the rusting carcass of a boat, stricken against the shore many years ago. A voice in his ear tells him he must get to the top of the boat – the Medusa – and deactivate a radio mast.

Guards mill around at beach level, patrolling and chatting. On the boat's russet-coloured deck, another set of men swing their AK47s around as they sweep their designated areas. There's a hole in the prow of the boat, large enough to fit through. The back of the boat falls away into the water, perhaps concealing another entrance. Behind our hero, on a bluff next to his starting position, is an opportune vantage point: stand there and you'd be free to survey the scene at leisure. A room full of gaming brains are whirring at once. We're all familiar with this kind of situation – gun in hand, task ahead – and we've all got our favourite resolutions.

Glass houses

This scene is *Far Cry* as we know it – a series of fighty vignettes that players can come at from hundreds of angles. There's freedom, there's choice, there's the potential for things to go violently and delightfully wrong. On the surface, there's no change.

Later, I'm shown a second mission. It starts on a hillside, in a glass-fronted potting shed occupied by a wild-eyed man flecked with white paint. This is Dr Earnhardt, and he wants the player to find him some mushrooms. Our hero makes his way down to a submerged cave at the bottom of a shallow hillside, his journey speeded up by handily placed ziplines. Gaining access to the cave requires a swim, but once inside there's no obvious threat. Getting the required mushrooms seems to be a case of pushing forward: the cave is winding but linear, and seems devoid of any kind of hostile life. Our hero brushes past some mushrooms – not the ones the doctor wants – and suddenly his vision swims. Colours change, light swells and fades. Trees and branches seem to grow from the cave's rock walls, and, strangest of all, that glass-fronted potting shed has made its way inside and is now hovering just out of reach. Approaching it causes it to retreat, leading our hero deeper into the cave, until he finds the requested mushroom and a secondary route to the outside world. When he went in, the island was lit by the midday sun; on exiting, it's midnight. It's only when he brings the mushroom back to Dr Earnhardt that I realise our hero had his gun holstered for the duration of the mission.

This kind of directed, linear adventure is new for the series. It's also worrying: *Far Cry* games are characterised by the freedom of approach they offer. But *Far Cry 3*'s producer, Dan Hay, is certain that these heavily scripted sections will add to the game.

"I think the best way I can describe it is a palette cleanser." Dan wouldn't commit to a ratio of these kinds of missions compared to more traditional firefights, instead describing the former as "something that every once in a while surprises you. You go down the rabbit hole and then you come back to the game and then you start to see: I'm going to do some weird stuff and then I'm going to get back to shooting."

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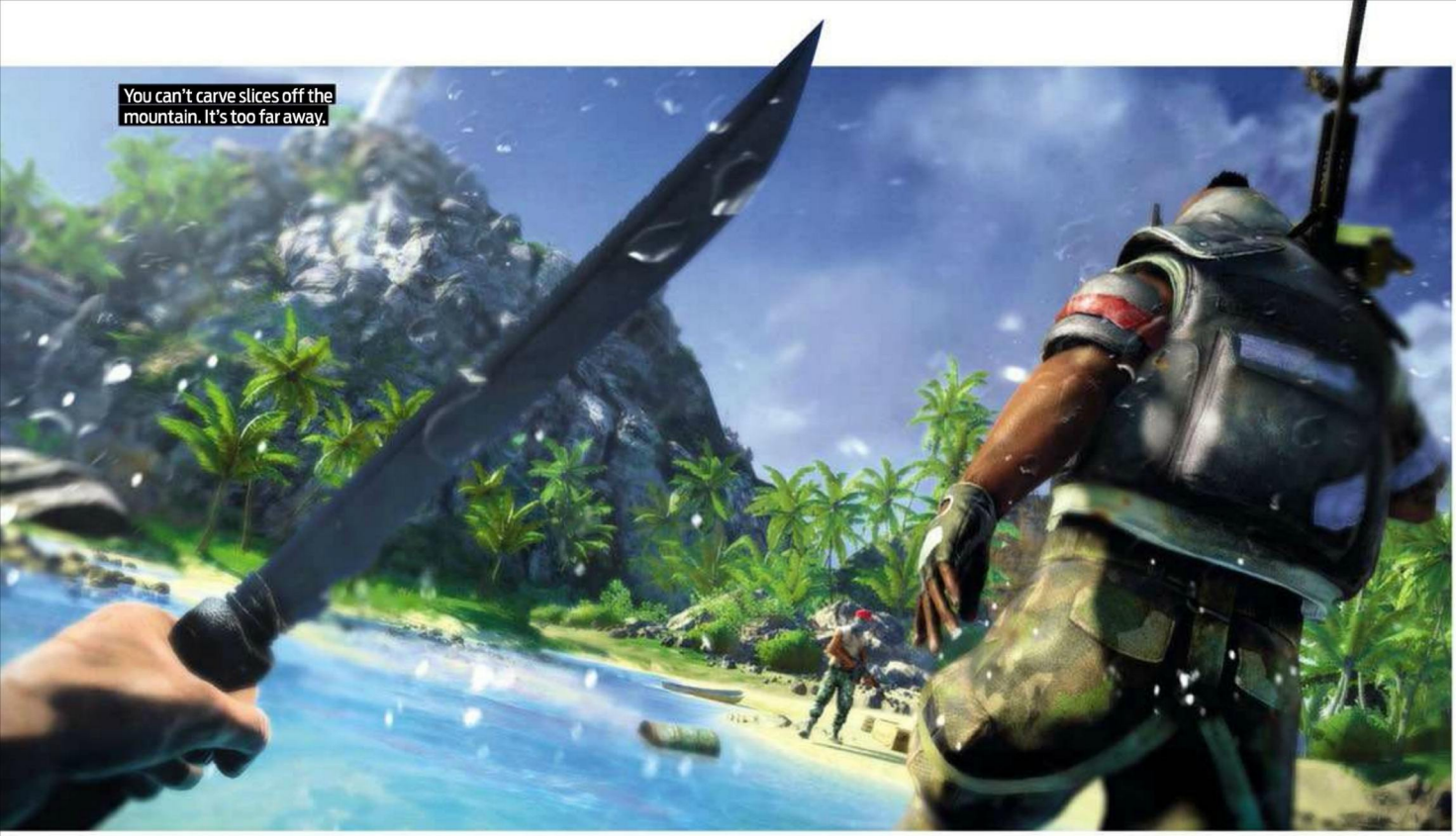

You can't carve slices off the mountain. It's too far away.

Back to the shooting. On board the Medusa, our hero crouches low, ducking through the rusted hole in the boat's hull. He takes the first guard by surprise, yanking a knife from his belt loop and inserting it in his clavicle. In one quick motion, he yanks it out and hurls it full-force at the dying man's colleague, who'd turned round to investigate the gurgling. Both collapse, and there's silence. But not for long. This version of *Far Cry 3*'s protagonist quickly drops the subtle approach, retrieving an assault rifle from one of his conquests and sprinting up the stairs to the upper deck. He takes potshots along the way, firing ragged-sounding rounds from the hip at guards failing to coordinate a response. From up high, he's got a clear sight on the agitated enemies below, and leans over the deck to choose his targets. There's the hint of a cover system: our hero raises his gun when he's behind the sturdy railing, sighting it again when he pops up to fire.

With the main throng of enemies now gently bleeding on the floor, our hero is free to pop up to the crow's nest and activate the necessary MacGuffin. Doing so triggers another wave of baddies. Our hero makes his way down to a mounted gun, turning it against the boat's previous occupiers. Over the rhythmic thud of the .50 cal bullets hitting sand and flesh, I hear our hero shriek: "that's for my brother, you motherfuckers!" There's a genuine sense of pain in his voice.

Our hero isn't a hero – at least not the way we expect our shooter heroes to be. He's Jason Brody, college student and backpacker, the kind of guy you unfriend on facebook because he won't shut up about how he found himself in Thailand. But rather than finding himself, Brody and his friends are found by the aforementioned Vaas, doolally leader of a gang of human traffickers, and taken to *Far Cry 3*'s island.

Son of a beach

Ubisoft Montreal want Brody to be an everyman, thrust into an extraordinary situation. Escaping his captors, Jason's story becomes part revenge fantasy – the kind of "I could do better" thoughts we have during horror films when characters drop

METHOD TO THE MADNESS Different ways to activate the Medusa's radio mast

1 TAKE TO THE SKIES
Far Cry 3's range of vehicles includes hang-gliders. Sneaky playtesters found they could grab one from the other side of the map and float serenely to the mast. Ubisoft left the option in.

2 THE SILENT APPROACH
Use boxes to break guards' lines of sight, stay quiet, and use silent takedowns on enemies facing the wrong way. Plug some skill points into stealth skills and you can silently throw knives.

3 GET YOUR FEET WET
The boat's rusty stern is submerged. Go for a paddle further down the coast and you can surface under the ship, bypassing the open approach in favour of an internal assault.

4 WATCH FROM AFAR
There's a vantage point nearby. Climb up and Jason can bust out his camera, snapping targets to highlight them against their surroundings before switching to the sniper rifle.

5 THE FRONT DOOR
Attract attention with a grenade tossed in the midst of the guards, then sprint through a hail of bullets, leaping over cover and popping off return shots until everyone is dead or dying.

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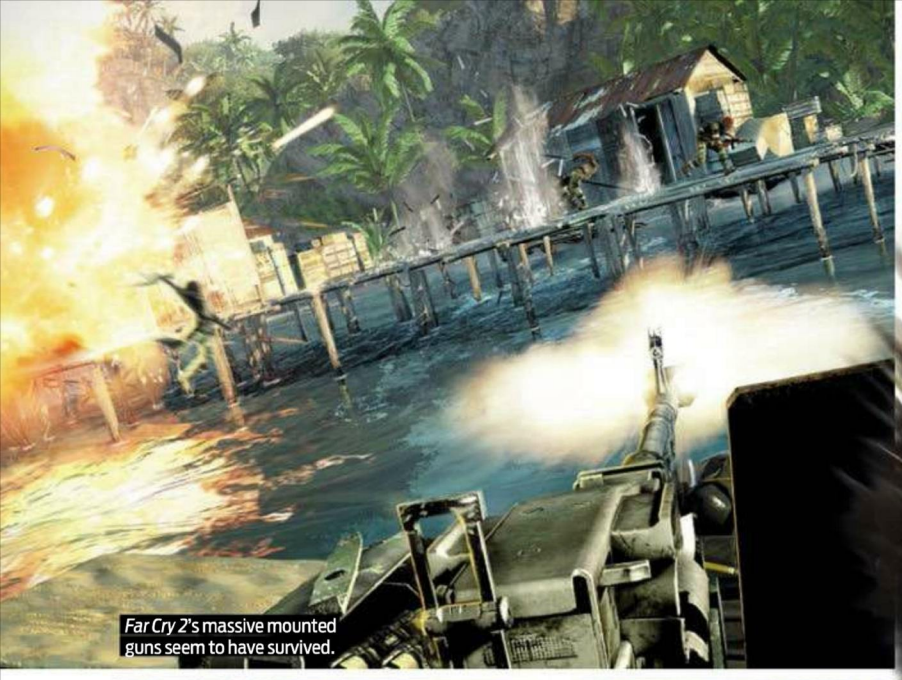

Far Cry 2's massive mounted guns seem to have survived.

Dr Earnhardt is a fun guy.

guns or split up to hide in attics – and part pure survival. Jason wasn't captured alone, and his friends weren't necessarily as lucky as he was in his escape. It's this that keeps him on the island, rather than trying to make a raft out of coconuts to escape the place, as Dan Hay explains: "The recipe for us is: Jason, remember your friends and find them."

Dan describes Jason as "pretty urban, pretty normal." Playing that guy – someone who'd fumble a grenade and blow his legs off, or leave the safety on during a shootout – would be frustrating. The Jason I was shown in the first of *Far Cry 3*'s missions was able to clear out corridors with one clip of ammo, was able to take bullets and shrug their effects off. Jason is changing. Dan puts it in context: "if he was to call his mom at the beginning of the game, she'd say 'my boy is safe, everything is good.' But if he was to survive this, she would hear something different in your voice, she'd know he'd been through something, and she'd recognise him as a different person."

That change isn't necessarily of Jason's own volition. Dan suggests that instead, it's the island changing Jason. "Jason's got a tattoo. [A Polynesian-style set of symbols down his left arm.] Where did it come from? He didn't arrive on the island with it. The story of the island is being etched on his body."

In game terms, Jason's growth means a wider range of ways to play. Killing enemies earns experience points, which in turn can be plugged into skills. Game designer Andrea Zanini wouldn't be drawn on many of these skills, but confirmed the knife-throwing double-takedown in the first mission I saw was the result of plugging these points into a specific place. You'll want to pick skills that augment the way you play: the knife-throw, for example, is ideal for players who want to get through the game without making a peep.

I asked Andrea if dedicated players could sneak through the entire game. His answer was careful: "We give you the choice to play how you want. If you want to play this mission stealthily, you can. But part of the theme and trying to survive on the island is keeping players on their toes. So every now and then we may switch it up. It's not, 'all of a sudden you're detected', but we increase that challenge level for you."

Detection will be more organic than it was in *Far Cry 2* – where laser-eyed eagle-people would spot you from a few miles over and lance you through the face with unerringly accurate sniper shots. Andrea elaborates: "We've completely

"The story of the island is being etched on his body"

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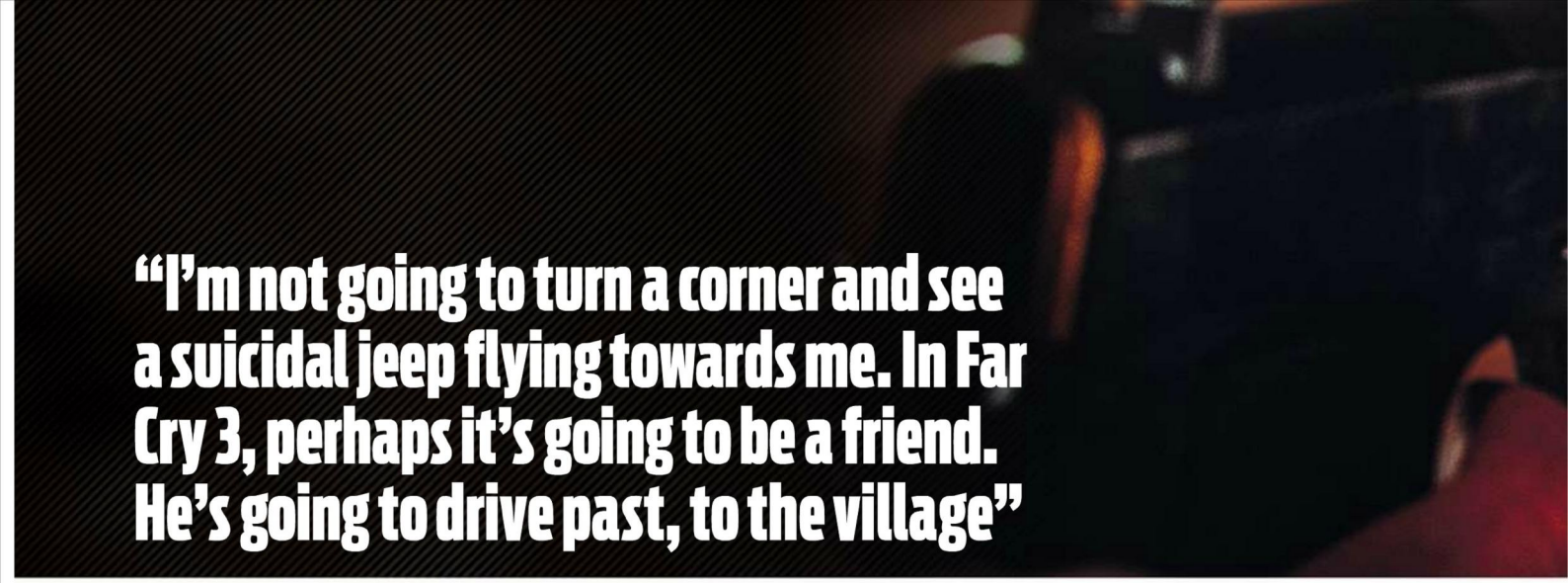

"I'm not going to turn a corner and see a suicidal jeep flying towards me. In Far Cry 3, perhaps it's going to be a friend. He's going to drive past, to the village"

rebuilt the AI, they're fully systemic and we really focused a lot on detection to make sure that it's clear to players when and where and why you got spotted." The piqued interest of guards is now signified by a white circular pulse in the middle of the screen, with an arrow pointing in the spotter's direction. This system – demonstrated handily by a notably curious lizard chasing Jason down a hillside after he was eyeballed near its nest – looks both more forgiving and more sensible than *Far Cry 2*'s inexplicable alternative.

The need to find his friends before Vaas and his cronies do their worst pulls Jason along through the story, but with an island's worth of secrets to find and places to explore, Dan gives players an excuse to put the main questline on hold for short periods. "After a while, you start to go a bit... wild. You start to go like the island is calling to you. This island made Vaas. And the question is, if you stay on it long enough, what's it going to do to you?"

Dan and his team speak of the island as a character as much as the humans that inhabit it. In the other *Far Cry* games, the world was important for its space, not its content. This time around, Ubisoft Montreal have worked at creating a place. Level design director Mark Thompson has some examples. "When you're on the Medusa there's a waterfall in the background. There's a little cave behind the waterfall." Dan Hay picks up the thread: "In the pool underneath the waterfall there's something! You look around behind you to where Vaas is bringing in ships and stripping them. What's in them? What do you have to swim down and find? What's he doing? Why?" Dan wiggles slightly at he describes one tiny section of his game from memory. Mark's got more details: "there are still old temples that can be found. The island was involved in World War II, so there's all that layer of history as well from that conflict. Then as the island was industrialised after the war, the western world came for its resources. They mined it, pillaged it, and when the resources dried up, they left again. There's all these layers of story that are embedded in the world. And the player is free outside of missions to just go off and explore. They'll find stories: the story of one soldier, or the story of a certain conflict."

Vaas's madness isn't the only brand of lunacy the island breeds. Mushroom man Dr Earnhardt is under the influence of both his own brand of fungi fumes and the island, but it manifests itself in different ways. Where Vaas shoots anyone he doesn't like, Earnhardt paints his house white once a week – hence the white flecks on his skin. What an unusual man he is.

Friendly natives

The island also has a native population, and unlike the previous game, not everyone wants to kill you. "In *Far Cry 2* there wasn't a concept of a population," Mark says. "We really wanted a living breathing world where not everyone was an enemy. I'm not going to turn a corner and see a suicidal jeep flying towards me. In *Far Cry 3*, perhaps it's going to be a friend. He's going to drive past and he's going to go to the village."

Villages offer further distractions from Jason's quest to find his friends, providing a place for players to "go to the bar to drink, play poker with the locals, and hear about what's happening on the island." The wilderness is still hostile, but it seems to have been dialled back from *Far Cry 2*'s homicidal mania. The most obvious symptom of this change is the game's checkpoints. Infamously in *Far Cry 2*, enemy soldiers would respawn at the game's many crossroads. *Far Cry 3* turns these into outposts. Once players have cleared one, it stays cleared, acting instead as a safehouse. Mark stresses the point: "They're dead, they stay dead, you come back and it's yours." They'll also provide a bolthole for other useful friendlies: "Perhaps there's a store there, perhaps people come and

INCREASED INSANITY THE MAKING OF A PSYCHOPATH

Michael Mando voices and provides motion capture for *Far Cry 3*'s psychotic Vaas, who leads a people-smuggling ring on the island. Mando explained to us how the character evolved as development progressed.

1 "When I first auditioned for Ubisoft, the character of Vaas did not exist. And my agent sent me for this part that was for a 6'6", 300llbs, very stoic, unemotional person." Michael is around 5'7", and a perma-grinning bundle of energy. It didn't work out.

2 "Obviously I didn't get the part. But my agent called me up about three weeks later telling me that Ubisoft liked the audition so much that they were willing to create a smaller character, based on the audition that I had done. That character was initially called Lupo."

3 "Lupo was drawn very differently to what I look like, both physically and facially. They couldn't match the movements and the facial expressions to the drawing." The character Mando had inspired didn't fit him. The studio still didn't want to give up.

4 "They eventually created Vaas to look more like." Two rehearsals were shot – one with an accent, one without. After being told they were going without the accent, Mando was mortified to hear his accented voice in the E3 demo, and presumed it was a mistake. It wasn't.

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Once cleared of bad guys, checkpoints stay cleared.

start to live there, almost like a mini village. The pirates have lost their control, and they fall back a little bit. And the world around that area changes: you see more friends, you get more opportunities to do quests."

The third and final mission I'm shown takes place on board a ship. Like the mushroom cave, it looks linear: small corridors and a heavy guard presence means Brody relies on his pump action shotgun to negotiate his way to his objective deep inside the vessel. The sequence ends with the discovery of a bomb and the slow sinking of the ship. As Jason swims to safety, he's on a one-way path. Light appears at the end of the tunnel – a way to safety – and a song starts up. It's timed to kick in as Jason's vision is greying out from lack of oxygen, orchestrated to give the moment the maximum emotional potency. "From time to time in the story, when we want to capture a certain emotion – put Jason through a certain experience, then we take more control," says Mark.

It seems, by Vaas's metric, that Ubisoft aren't insane. They're working to change *Far Cry*, fixing mistakes in the previous games and directing players to avoid the failures that unbridled freedom can bring.

But even with all of its changes, *Far Cry 3*'s developers would never be able to resist the lure of choice. It's in their bones. After the demonstration concludes, I ask Mark if there was any other way Jason could've played the final, apparently linear mission. Cheerfully, he tells me: "Definitely! You can stealth your way through the ship, for example. When you open the first door, a guy will turn around. Kill him silently, and then you can move through that room and kill everyone else in there without making a sound."

As they'd say in Ubisoft Montreal's French-speaking home city, plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose – the more things change, the more they stay the same. ■

Saving the world from Pirates of the Caribbean 5.

Fire in a jungle? That's probably fine.

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With **XCOM: ENEMY UNKNOWN**, will the fans finally get the game they deserve?

By Graham Smith

Jake Solomon really loves *X-COM*. This isn't as notable as how badly Firaxis and publishers 2K Games want you to know that he really loves *X-COM*. It's not just the lead designer, either. Everyone at Firaxis loves *X-COM*, I'm told. If someone joins the team and hasn't played *X-COM*, playing *X-COM* is their first assignment. I'm reminded repeatedly that the original game was published by MicroProse Software, and that Firaxis were born from the ruins of that company.

You can forgive their anxiety. When 2K Marin announced their own *XCOM* back in 2010, the internet shook with frustration. Sixteen years after the Gollop brothers' turn-based masterpiece was released, the series was returning – as a first-person shooter. It wasn't what fans wanted.

This is what we wanted. Later this year, Earth's Extraterrestrial Combat Unit will return. *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* is part remake of the 1994 original, and part sequel. It is developed by the company that created *Civilization*, under the stewardship of creative director Sid Meier. It is turn-based. It has destructible environments. It has the Geoscape. It has the Skyranger. And I'm just about to see it for the first time.

RELEASE
2012

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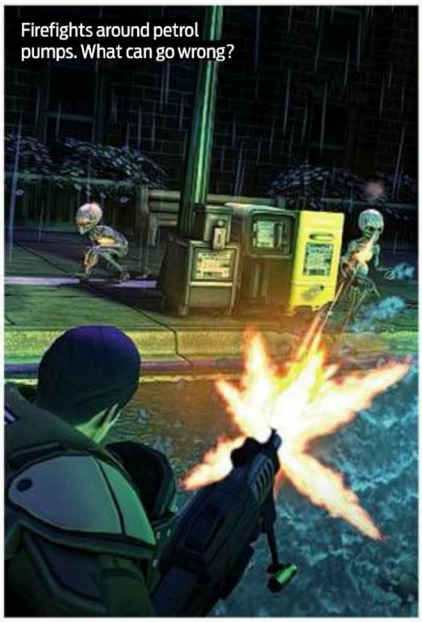
The cover system is a new addition to *XCOM*.

CREDIT I would rename her 'Buddy Russo'.


Firefights around petrol pumps. What can go wrong?

Almost everything in this scene is destructible.

The screen goes black. When it fills again I'm looking at the XCOM organisation's new headquarters.

"We call this the ant farm," Jake says.

It's a side-on view of a vast underground base, colourful and bustling. It looks nothing like the original game. It looks beautiful. I can see the Skyranger in the hangar bay near the top. I can see soldiers wandering the halls, exercising, playing games in the rec room and visiting injured friends in the infirmary.

"This is where the player returns after every mission."

Your lavish headquarters are also the game's menu. As Jake selects Science Lab at the top of the screen, the camera swoops in close to show the inside of the laboratory. Here you can set your science team's research goals, unlocking new weapons and equipment to help you in your fight against the aliens.

Switch to the Barracks and the camera shoots across the base. From here you can customise your soldiers' appearance, give them names and nicknames, and manage their equipment and abilities.

Inside the Situation Room, you're faced with a shadowy figure against a glitching, TV static background. XCOM is an international organisation, funded by countries around the world. If those countries are to continue giving you valuable resources, you'll need to keep them happy by occasionally bending your plans to their selfish desires. Selfish desires such as "Please launch some satellites over our country, to keep an eye out for aliens here," and "Please stop the aliens from killing us all." They give you scientists and other rewards for helping them, but concentrate too much on servicing those countries and your overall strategy will suffer.

"When units die in *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*, as in its predecessors, they die for good"

X-scape

It's the Mission Control room that looks most familiar. Flick to it and the camera switches to a satellite view of Earth, spinning in space. This is the original game's fondly remembered Geoscape. From here you can scan for UFOs in regions covered by your satellites. If you find them, you can go fight them. That might mean scrambling an Interceptor to tackle the UFO in the air, assuming you've built one nearby. Or it might mean picking up to six of your best soldiers and going to fight them on the ground.

Jake does the latter. As the mission loads, the screen shows the Skyranger blasting across the sky. Like everything I've seen so far, it looks updated, but still feels a lot like the original. It's *X-COM* turned *XCOM-nom-nom*.

With the original *X-COM*, British game designer Julian Gollop and his brother Nick set out to create a follow-up to their game *Laser Squad*. Then called *Laser Strike 2*, they signed the game with MicroProse, who had just had enormous success with Sid Meier's *Civilization*. Their new publisher suggested the Gollops bring a similar scale to their next game.

Eventually released as *UFO: Enemy Unknown* in Europe in 1994, and in America later that same year as *X-COM: UFO Defense*, the game they created married the squad tactics of *Laser Squad* to a global strategy layer and a modern day setting. The result was an instant hit.

"If you get ten fans and you say, 'Give me the number one thing that makes it great,' you'd get 15 answers," says Jake. "It's tough, but I would say high stakes is what *XCOM* is about."

When soldiers die in *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*, as in its predecessors, they die for good. That doesn't sound like a big deal at first – units die in strategy games all the time. But you invest so much more in an *XCOM* soldier.

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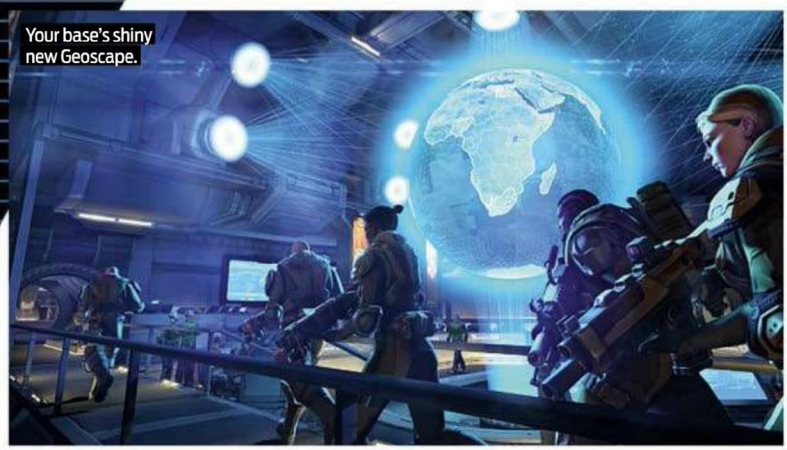
It's not only your soldiers who will take cover.


Your base's shiny new Geoscape.

The new 'Man in Black' alien is almost human.

You can move and perform a single action each turn.

XCOM GAMEOGRAPHY

UFO: Enemy Unknown *(1994)*
Re-branded as *X-COM* in the US to capitalise on the popularity of The X-Files.

X-COM: Terror from the Deep *(1995)*
Developed in under a year, set underwater, very difficult, but made only minor changes.

X-COM: Apocalypse *(1997)*
Set in a single city instead of the entire world, and claimed to have a "self-learning AI." It did not.

X-COM: Interceptor *(1998)*
Space-based. Introduced multiple planets, flight simulation, multiplayer, and flopped commercially.

X-COM: Enforcer *(2001)*
Began as an FPS, became a third-person action game. Sucked, and killed the series for a decade.

XCOM: Enemy Unknown *(2012)*
A reboot/remake/sequel of the original classic, by *Civilization* developers Firaxis.

Let's imagine. A new recruit joins XCOM, and you name him Jimmy Doyle. He starts off as a rookie, with low stats and a lot of nerves. You customise his appearance, giving him a big nose and a scruffy face. On his first mission, he comes face to face with a Muton. A large, gorilla-like alien, the Muton uses a special ability to pound its chest and panic the inexperienced rookie. Doyle fires wildly without you telling him to, but you get him behind cover before the Muton kills him, and he survives the rest of the mission.

Doyle then levels up to Squaddie and earns himself a nickname. He's now Jimmy 'Popeye' Doyle. At this point in the original *X-COM*, you'd be putting points into an enormous wall of stats, but that system has completely changed. Recruits now have a small number of stats that level automatically, and when they reach Squaddie, reveal a predilection for one of four classes: Heavy, Sniper, Support or Assault.

At each level-up, you make a decision about which of two class-specific perks to grant your recruit. It means you're making fewer choices than in the original game, but each choice is far more significant.

Popeye falls in to the Assault class, and so you give him a passive perk. Now every time he sees an enemy, the percentage chance of him scoring a critical hit goes up. In the next ten or twenty hours, you're going to take Popeye on a dozen missions. You're going to micromanage every piece of equipment he carries, every step he takes, every shot he makes. You're going to tailor the equipment available to him by the research options you've chosen back at base. You're going to shape the team around him, so that he has a Sniper for support, or a bunch of other Assault guys, or robotic heavy weapons platforms as his sidekicks. He's going to have levelled a bunch more times, and you're going to have picked a bunch more perks for him.

He's now your favourite toy out of all your toy soldiers. You've thought about him as much as you have your Khajiit in *Skyrim* or your Monk in *Diablo III*. Remember that. We'll come back to Popeye Doyle in a moment.

Action station

Jake's mission has loaded, and his squad are standing outside a petrol station. It looks like America, but the setting is generic enough that it could be anywhere. It also looks nice, but not stunning. It's much less cartoony than the original game's low resolution sprites, but the game's artists aren't aiming for gritty reality either. The characters and models look chunky, sort of like action figures.

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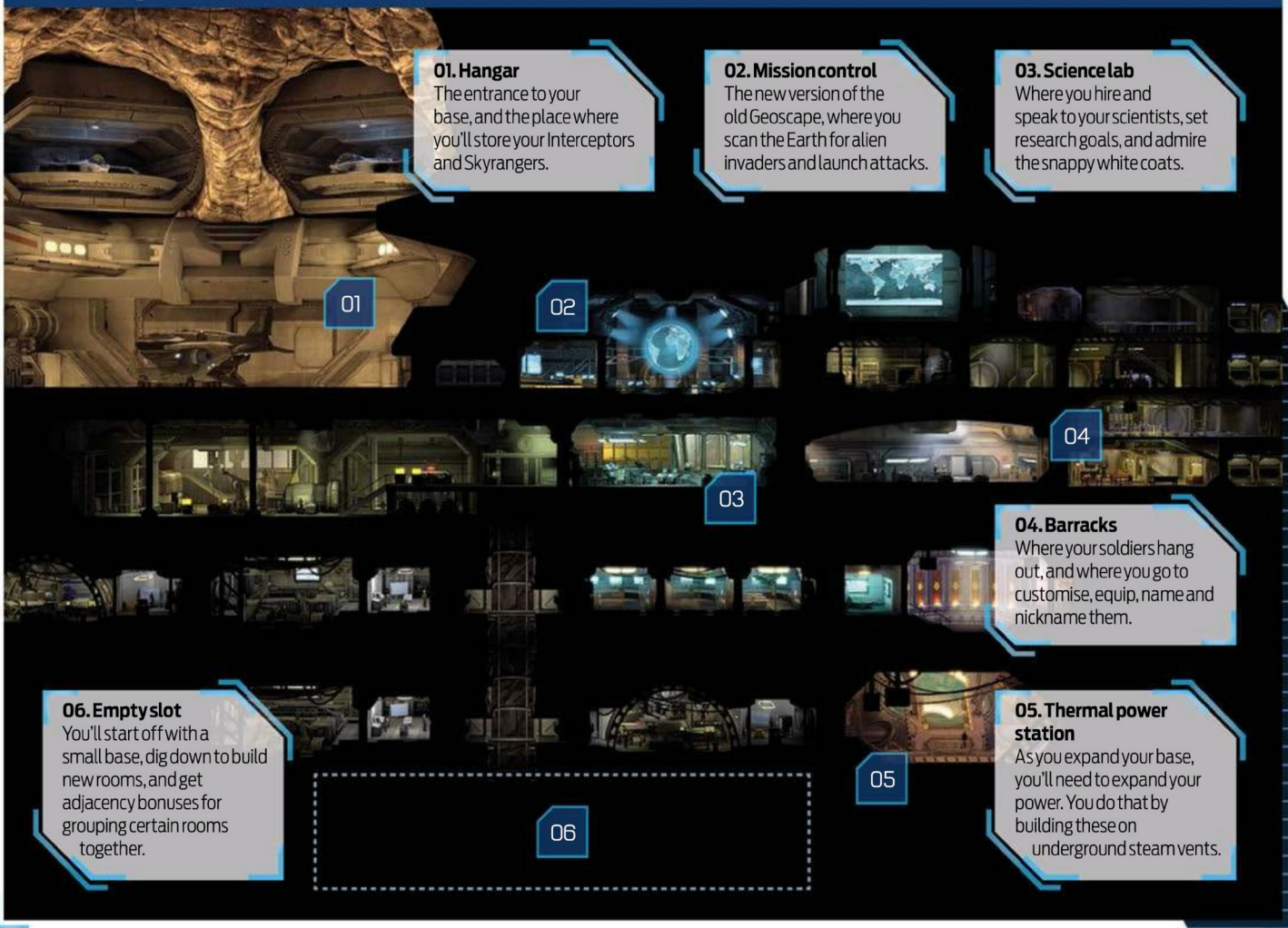
XCOM HQ INSIDE YOUR NEW UNDERGROUND BASE



One by one, Jake orders his recruits to move up nearer the petrol pumps and take cover. He only has four soldiers along for this mission. With research, that can be upgraded to a maximum of six.

Time units, the resource that allowed you to perform actions in the original, have also gone. Now, each soldier can move once and perform a single action per turn. An action is anything from shooting a weapon to hunkering down behind something that's part of the new cover system.

Almost instantly, one of Jake's recruits spots a couple of Sectoids. We're introduced to them by a short, in-engine cutscene. The Sectoids look less childlike than in the original game, but they're clearly inspired by the same source material: they're grey, skinny, with big heads and bug eyes.

One Sectoid scuttles inside the petrol station, while another takes cover behind a nearby car. Jake finds his Sniper, and using a special grapplehook, has her climb on to the ceiling of the petrol station. She'll come in useful later.

Back down below, a few shots have been exchanged. The Sectoid inside the building is using a special ability to form a psychic link with the one taking cover outside, boosting its stats.

These are Sectoids, however, the weakest alien in the game. Jake has his Heavy lay down suppressing fire, and orders his Assault soldier to toss a grenade inside the vehicle. As it explodes, the camera cuts in close for the second time to show the Sectoid's death. It'll do this a few more times to mark each kill and each new alien introduction. It's a minor intrusion.

The Assault soldier now bursts through the front door of the petrol station and takes down the remaining Sectoid. Unfortunately, there's a downside to speed: the noise made from crashing inside has alerted some Mutons in an adjacent room.

These are another classic *X-COM* alien. In the original game, they were big and brutish, but looked like Mexican wrestlers in unitards. Now they're more menacing, wearing bulky metal suits and blessed with big shoulders and lots of muscle, but they're still recognisably Mutons.

They kill the Assault soldier.

Now, imagine that soldier was Popeye Doyle, the recruit you developed over the last 20 hours of play.

If only you'd done things differently. If only you hadn't rushed through the door of the petrol station, but opened it quietly to avoid alerting the Mutons. If only you hadn't gone inside at all, but had your Heavy blow apart the wall with a rocket launcher. If only you'd left Popeye back at base for this one, and brought a team of robots instead.

You made decisions – from what to research, to what to carry, to who to bring, to how to develop those people – and every one of those decisions impacted down a long chain so that now Gene Hackman is dead.

In memoriam

That wasn't the actual name of Jake's dead soldier, of course, and now I can't even remember what it was. His name will feature in the memorial room back at base, though, alongside the name of everyone else you get killed.

"The only way I can say to a player, 'Yeah, I know you love that guy and you worked hard on that guy, but now

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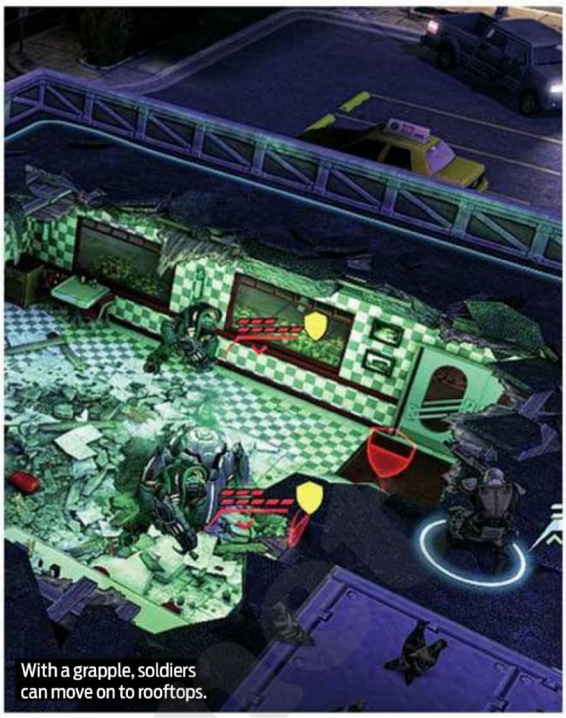
Hiding behind explosive objects: a bad idea?


With a grapple, soldiers can move on to rooftops.

Get this close and someone is about to die.

Alien research: more fun than pippeting all day.

I'm going to snatch him from you,' is by giving the player complete control," says Jake. "I will give you complete control of this soldier, and all you have to do is make the right decisions and you can protect him. I think that creates real tension and drama, and I think that defines *X-COM*."

To take down the Mutons, Jake goes down the Heavy-blows-a-hole-in-the-side-of-the-building-with-the-rocket-launcher route, and that gives his Sniper on the roof line of sight with those inside. She quickly finishes the job. Mission successful. This was an easy one, but success is still a relief.

The missions will get much harder later in the game, when more aliens will appear. A lot of those will be familiar from the original series, including the creepy Cyberdisc. At least one will be new, as Jake showed me artwork for the Man in Black, a skinny, acrobatic alien that can pass for human in a crowd.

After watching Jake play the game, a lot of my fears about it have been put to rest. It looks like *XCOM*. Still, I'm nervous. Everything I saw was running on a PC, but it was played with an Xbox 360 controller (hence the icons in the screenshots). I asked Jake afterwards if the user interface would be the same across PC and console. He laughed. "No, no, no. Nooo. Oh man, no."

So that's a no?

"I wouldn't do that to you, are you kidding me? No. We have a team that's doing the PC UI, and our tactical UI is a standalone PC tactical UI." It's still a work in progress, that's all.

Jake keeps going before I even get the chance to ask about mods. "Because it's on Unreal Engine 3 too, the idea is that there is the ability for modability. It won't be anything that we're committing to for release, but it's very, very easy using Unreal titles to then give people access to the scripts."

I'd bet on mod tools three months after release. And mods to increase the battlefield soldier count and remove those incredibly brief cutscenes, oh, about twelve seconds after that.

It wasn't you

There was one other thing everyone wanted to clear up: 2K Games didn't listen to you. As tempting as it is to think that the announcement of a new, turn-based *XCOM* comes as a response to the tweeted fan-screams over the first-person shooter, that's not the case. Firaxis have been working on *Enemy Unknown* since spring 2007.

When they saw people clamouring for the very game they were making, they were desperate to be able to tell them. They waited until it was ready.

"Maybe this is corny, but you like to make people happy. I think the kick we get as game developers is giving people this experience that makes them happy, and so when you think you have something that will make people happy, you want to share that."

Although what I was shown was a relatively thin slice of the full game, that doesn't mean that's all they've made. "You can play all the way through," says Jake. "Over Christmas break, I actually did a Let's Play *XCOM* for our team."

Let's Plays are diaries of game experiences, often using names of friends for characters, and told on forums or YouTube. "Everybody on the team signed up, and people would send their name and their customisation stats, like Head 3, Skin 4, nickname, and they're all terrible nicknames. And I played through and narrated the whole way."

It's rare to meet a developer who is having so much fun playing his own game, never mind writing about it.

Jake Solomon really *does* love *X-COM*. Firaxis are desperate to make sure that you know that, but it's not bullshit. They want you to know how much they care. They want you to know they're aware how much *you* care, and as corny as it sounds, how hard they're working to make you happy. ■

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SKYRIM

MOD SKYRIM TO PERFECTION

The add-ons no Dovahkiin should be without

GETTING STARTED

1. Download the Skyrim Script Extender from *skse.silverlock.org* and extract the files to your Steam/SteamApps/common/skyrim folder. Mods need it.
2. Head to Skyrim Nexus (*skyrimnexus.com*) and create an account. It's the best site for *Skyrim* mods, but you need an account (free) to download the bigger ones.
3. If you don't have a program that can extract .7z files, get one from *izarc.org*. Open mods with that, and the readme.txt will tell you where to extract the files: usually to /skyrim/data

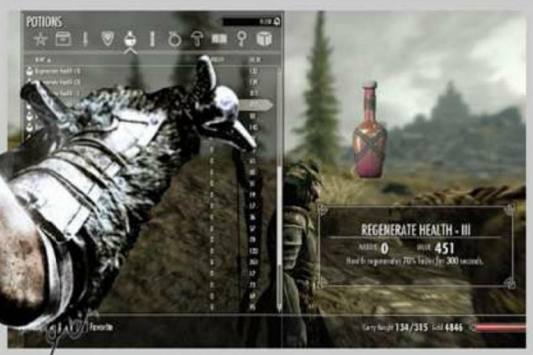
THEN GET THESE...

SkyUI

Provides a slick PC-specific overhaul of the inventory, magic and shop menus, which lets you browse large lists of items at once, sort them by value or weight, and see their effects at a glance. In shops, the shopkeeper's inventory is on a different tab to yours, so there's no more confusion. Beautiful and downright essential. *bit.ly/skyUI*

Tytanis

A new-content mod so huge you won't need any others. Adds spells to summon skeletal dragons and ghost trolls, crafting to make magic arrows and spell books, and dragons that spit exploding dogs made of fire. Also lets you ride sabertooth cats, mammoths and elks. Install it now: you have to hunt around for a lot of this stuff. *bit.ly/tytanis*



Better Sorting

We don't really care how you phrase it, Bethesda; health potions should be next to each other. If you're going to put the word 'potent' in front of one, and 'vigorous' in front of another, you can't leave us with an alphabetical inventory listing. Better Sorting renames all items by type: Potion: Restore Health III. Perfect. *bit.ly/bettersort*

World Map in full 3D

Skyrim's map is pretty but annoying – it restricts your view, and it's blurry and foggy. This mod lets you zoom around it freely, the world coming into full detail as you get down to eye-level and whizz around like a ghost. Both impressive and also useful for getting a sense of where things are. *bit.ly/sky3dmap*

ELOCUTION LESSONS

Get the four best dragon shouts

1 Ice Form

Leave foes paralysed, or shatter them. Do the College of Winterhold quests to find one Word Wall at Saarthal. The other two are at Mount Anthor, southwest of Winterhold, and Frostmere Crypt.

2 Throw Voice

Enemies wander over to investigate the noise, letting you manipulate them out of your way or into traps. You learn all three words of this shout from one wall, Shearpoint, just north of High Hrothgar.

3 Call Dragon

Follow the main quest – boring though it can be – and your reward is particularly special. A pact with a dragon who you can then summon to fight for you in combat any time you like.

4 Storm Call

Find its three words on the dragon walls at Forelhost fort south-east of Riften, High Gate Ruins, and Skuldafn – a temple you only reach towards the end of the main quest.

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BUILD A KILLER CHARACTER

Blueprints to live your life by

THE MONK TANK

PERKS

Magic Resistance
An Alteration perk that gives you up to a maximum of 30% magic resistance – with your race bonus, you're more than halfway to magic immunity.

The Lord Stone
Not a perk but the blessing of a Guardian Stone, due east of Morthal, which gives you an extra 25% magic resist *and* 50 extra physical armour. You are now a tank.

Agent of Mara
Received for completing a quest started in Riften's temple of Mara, this'll give you that last 15% magic resistance you need to become completely ridiculous.

COMPANION

J'Zhargo
Join the College of Winterhold and do a favour for him. His Destruction spells will help your damage output, and his high HP means he can tough it out with you.

... AND THE REST

Breton
The monk race get an innate 25% resistance to magic damage, which can be built up to 95% with perks and tricks. It makes mages and dragons trivial to deal with.

Shield
Some bandits have two-handed weapons that do huge damage in a single hit. Get something to put between you and them.

Heavy armour
The obvious complement to great magical defence is great physical defence. The weight and speed penalty can eventually be removed with perks.

MASTER OF PUPPETS

PERKS

Twin Souls
This Conjuration perk lets you summon two zombies or atronarchs at once. Combined with a companion and infighting enemies, it's like having an army.

Master of the Mind
An Illusion perk that means your Fury and Calm spells work even on robots and undead, leaving nothing immune to your trickery.

Quiet Casting
if you do come up against something you can't easily fight, this Illusion perk makes your spells silent, so you can manipulate them from afar without being detected.

COMPANION

Illia
Do a quest for this mage at Darklight Tower, southwest of Riften, and she'll follow you. She has fantastic offensive spells *and* can conjure atronarchs herself.

... AND THE REST

High Elf
You're going to be specialising in Illusion and Conjuration to let others do your fighting for you. High Elves have great magicka, and start with the Fury spell.

Dead Thrall
By the top level of Conjuration, you can bring dead people back to fight for you permanently.

Mayhem
Illusion magic lets you turn enemies on each other, and if you keep up with the perks that increase its power, it'll always work on enemies of your level.

MASTER OF STEALTH

PERKS

Assassin's Blade
15x extra damage for sneak attacks with a dagger. You can double that with some gloves the Dark Brotherhood give you, at which point it's usually an insta-kill.

Pickpocket weapons
This is a high-level perk, requiring Sneak 70, but once you have it you can disarm humanoid enemies and *then* backstab them.

Steady Hand
Slows down time while you're aiming a bow. It's handy both for predicting enemy movement more accurately, and getting some thinking time in a tight spot.

FOLLOWER

Cicero
You'll have to side with this gibbering lunatic druring the Dark Brotherhood questline to get his allegiance, but there's no one sneakier or better with bows.

... AND THE REST

Wood Elf
Great bonuses to almost all sneaky skills, and the ability to command low-level creatures is handy in the early game if you get rumbled before your Sneak skill is up to scratch.

Bow
Sneak attacks are easy to pull off from long range, and each one boosts your Sneak skill. Each time enemies come looking for you and give up, that's another boost too.

Light armour
The weight of your armour counts against your sneaking ability. A Sneak perk halves the already small penalty for Light armour.

DEATH DEALER

PERKS

Deep Freeze
A Destruction perk that causes your frost spells to freeze people solid if they're low on health. Effectively ends the fight much sooner, and is hilarious.

Regeneration
A Restoration perk further increases your magicka regeneration. With this, Morokei and the robes, you'll have at least four times the normal regeneration rate.

Enchanting
Lets you enchant items that are already enchanted, including Morokei and your robe. Add more magicka regen or make Destruction spells even cheaper.

FOLLOWER

Lydia
You have all the ranged damage you need, so the best follower is a melee fighter to occupy the enemies. Lydia is the best, and she'll join you early in the main quest.

... AND THE REST

High Elf
For pure damage output, spells beat everything. Starting with 50 extra magicka and an ability to rapidly regenerate it once a day, High Elf is the only choice.

Morokei
Follow the College of Winterhold questline and you'll find this Dragon Priest mask, which adds 100% to your magicka regen.

Master's Robes of Destruction
Robes actually help in *Skyrim*: they regenerate Magicka. The college of Winterhold will sell you one that also makes Destruction cheaper to cast.

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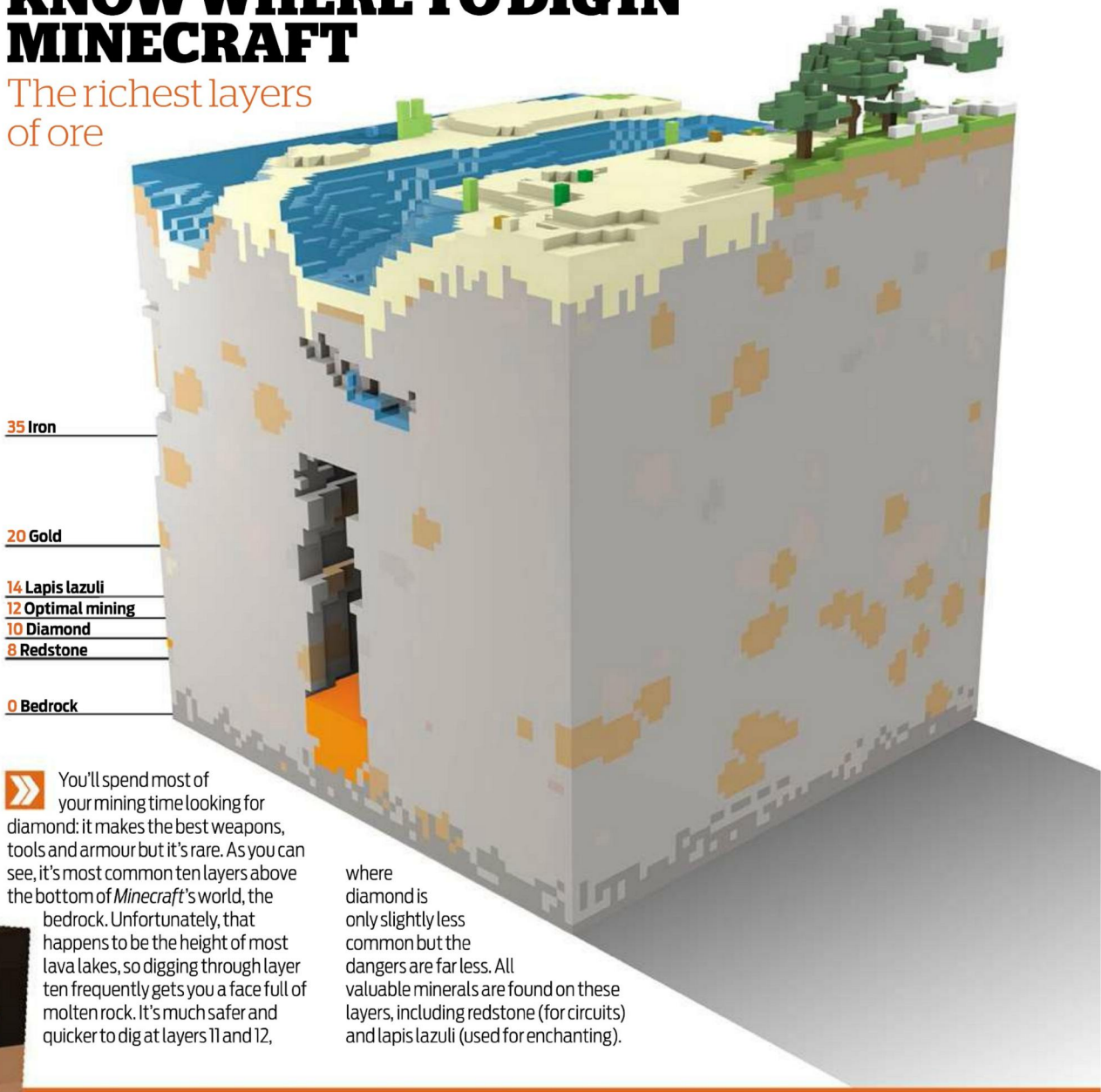
MINECRAFT

KNOW WHERE TO DIG IN MINECRAFT

The richest layers of ore



You'll spend most of your mining time looking for diamond: it makes the best weapons, tools and armour but it's rare. As you can see, it's most common ten layers above the bottom of *Minecraft*'s world, the bedrock. Unfortunately, that happens to be the height of most lava lakes, so digging through layer ten frequently gets you a face full of molten rock. It's much safer and quicker to dig at layers 11 and 12, where diamond is only slightly less common but the dangers are far less. All valuable minerals are found on these layers, including redstone (for circuits) and lapis lazuli (used for enchanting).

THREE GREAT ADVENTURE MAPS

Stop building for a second and explore these gorgeous handcrafted worlds

1 SECRET OF THE LOST CITY

This one's played in Creative mode, so you can't die and it's just about exploring. It's an Aztec-style city full of strange formations and spectacular views. It's worth installing the Painterly texture pack that it recommends – it's a fairly easy process.

bit.ly/MineSecret

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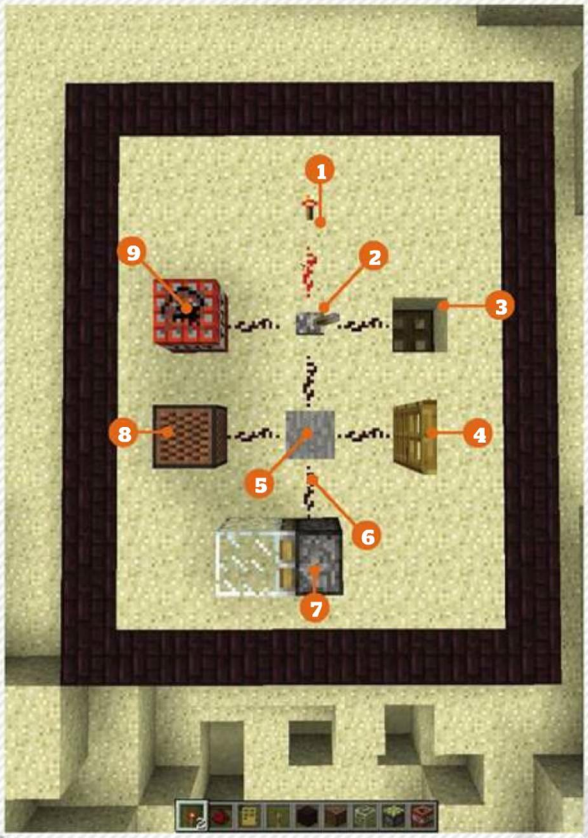
HOW TO...

Make a basic circuit



The most interesting things you can build in *Minecraft* all require power. With it, you can shove blocks around, play your own music and create traps. The game's power system is all based on redstone, a red dust that's plentiful near the bedrock (see facing page). You can create such complex circuits with this stuff that you can build whole computers – and even run games – within *Minecraft* itself. Even if you don't have nine months and an electronics degree, setting up a basic circuit to do fun things is actually pretty easy. Here's what you need.

1 Redstone Torch
These will provide constant power to anything they are connected to by redstone wire.

2 Lever
A lever provides power to everything it's connected to when it's thrown, until it's thrown again.

3 Trapdoor
When activated, a trapdoor will open and anyone on top will fall through. Fun over lava.

4 Door
Useful for keeping enemies out of your house at night without bricking yourself in.

5 Pressure Plate
Turns things on when you (or a monster) is standing on it, and then off again when you get off.

6 Redstone Wire
Carries power from a switch or power source to something that needs activating.

7 Sticky Piston
Pistons shove blocks in the direction they're facing. Sticky ones also pull them back when they turn off.

8 Note Block
Plays a note. The block type underneath determines the instrument, and right-click changes pitch.

9 TNT
Violently explodes when activated, destroying all blocks (and most enemies) in a large radius.

2 KURAST
A vast, gorgeous island with a really well thought out system for player challenge. In multiplayer, you each pick a class by opening a different chest of equipment. You're only allowed to place orange wool blocks, so these are used like a resource.
bit.ly/MineKurast

3 PALADIN'S QUEST
A story-driven map that works by putting signposts in the world that tell you which YouTube video to watch, like optional cut-scenes. To be honest, you can safely skip these and it's still a beautiful island full of cool secrets and exciting places.
bit.ly/MinePaly

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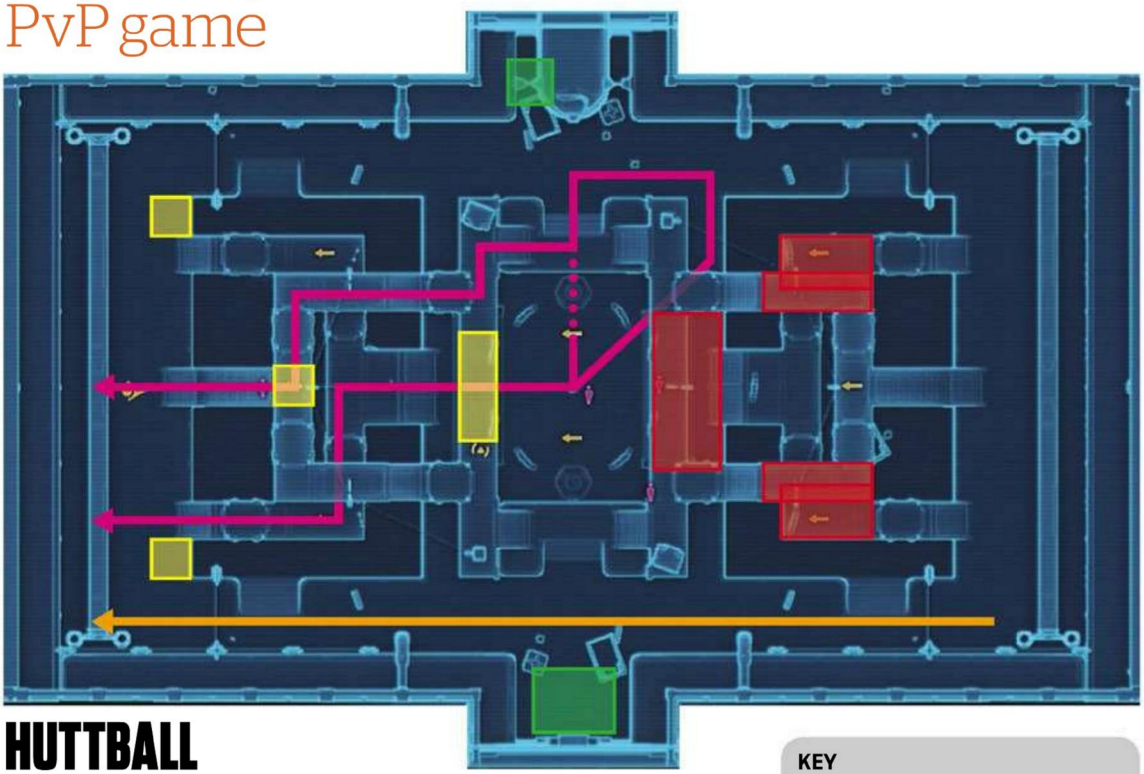
THE OLD REPUBLIC

HOW TO...
Improve your PvP game

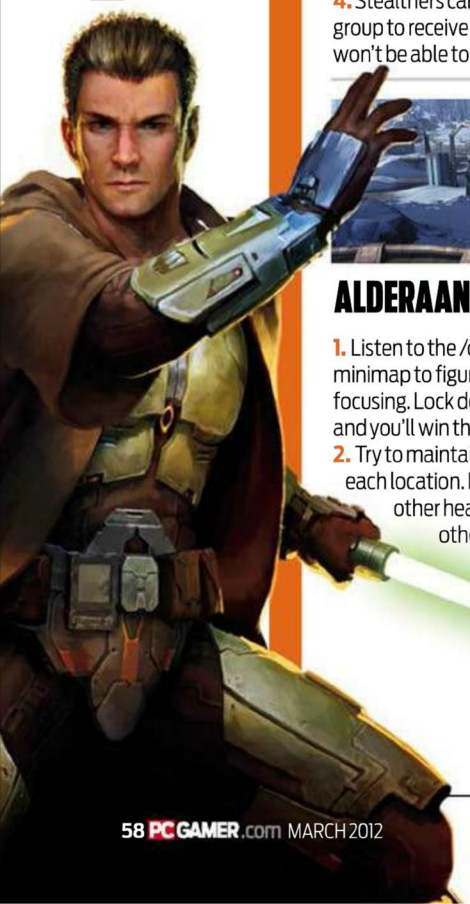


HUTTBALL

1. Make sure the 'pass the ball' ability is set up on your action bar.
2. Tanks make ideal ball carriers. Learn the layout of the walkways to make the run to the finish line as short as possible.
3. Healers should support carriers with shields and heal-over-time abilities.
4. Stealthers can move ahead of the group to receive passes that the enemy won't be able to stop.
5. Use distance-closing abilities like Force Charge to skip sections, and use grabs like Force Pull to send ball carriers off-course.
6. Extrication and Rescue are high-level Sorcerer and Sage abilities that can pull a friendly player to your location. Careful use of these can bypass areas of the map.
7. Avoid getting drawn in to fights on the ramps – get stunned on top of a fire trap and it's all over.

KEY

- Pass to here
- Direction of play
- Hide and heal
- Ball carrier routes
- Chokepoints for defenders
- Ball carrier jump



ALDERAAN

1. Listen to the /ops channel and use the minimap to figure out where your team is focusing. Lock down two of the turrets and you'll win the match.
2. Try to maintain a balance of classes at each location. If you arrive to see five other healers already there, find other people to help.
3. If you see the enemy moving en masse to a single location, let your team know. You can also do this on the speeder ride in after you die.
4. Certain walls can be scaled with clever jumping. Use this to get up to vantage points or quickly move between turrets.
5. Don't be afraid to take the long way round, especially when attacking the middle turret. Most defenders will be facing towards your team's spawn, and it's even possible to cap the point while they're not looking.
6. If you're overwhelmed while on defence, don't run away: every second counts, so interrupt enemy captures for as long as you can.
7. Leading kill-hungry players into traps is a good way of thinning out the enemy defences. Alderaan's blind corners and isolated areas are ideal for this.

VOIDSTAR

1. Coordinate using the minimap and /ops channel. Defenders should spread out evenly between the doors.
2. Save your crowd control abilities for people trying to arm bombs: don't waste them in regular battle.
3. When a door goes down, move as quickly as possible to the next one. There's no use fighting in the middle ground.
4. Defensive stealthers: prowl near doors to give attackers a false sense of security.
5. Push enemies off the bridge with knockback attacks in the second stage.
6. If an attack goes awry, try to back off and heal. It's quicker than respawning and then running back.

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HOW TO... Get a ~~pink~~ MAGENTA lightsaber

Lightsaber and blaster colour crystals are serious business. They're a status symbol, a way of proclaiming your taste, alignment and attitude. Nothing says confidence quite like a pink lightsaber, so we've put together a guide to tracking down one of the rarest and most sought-after items in *The Old Republic*.

Get the schematic
To make the crystal you'll need the 400 Artificing skill. The schematic is a rare bind-on-pickup drop from world bosses on Belsavis and Hoth: you'll need eight max-level players to take them down.

Hoth world boss
Found in the south-east corner of the Clabburn Tundra. Bring several healers and watch out for his area of effect knock-back attack.

Belsavis world boss
The Primal Destroyer appears in the middle of the lake on a two-hour respawn timer. You'll need plenty of healing and more than one tank – if you kill the extra monsters he summons, he'll enrage and wipe out your group. Get someone to hold them while you kill the big guy.

Get the Magenta Degan Crystal
Getting this unique crafting item is a lengthy process. Some of this can be done solo, but you'll need a full group of level 50s for the last stage. It's worth doing everything with mates if you can, so that everyone's at the same stage when you finally get to the boss.

Get everything else
When you have your schematic, you'll need to find eight Primeval Artifact Fragments, six Lorrdian Gemstones, and six Corusca Gems. These are all regular – albeit high level – crafting items, so there are two ways of getting them.

Water from Tatooine
Scour the deserts for Water Vaporators – tall, antenna-like pieces of machinery. You're looking for one with a usable panel at its base.

Archeology
Train Archeology to 340+ and look for Primeval Artifact Fragments in the wild on high-level planets, or you can spend credits on crew missions.

Be rich
Buy them from the Galactic Trade Market instead.

Ice from Hoth
Now you've had a drink, head to Hoth. North of the Imperial Leth Outpost there's a mountain that looks impassable, but you can ride most of the way up it. You'll be hit by a slowdown debuff, and you'll receive Pure Shockfrozen Water in your inventory.

Treasure hunting
Send crew mates on high level Treasure Hunting missions to get your Lorrdian and Corusca gemstones. Be prepared to drop a fair amount of credits on missions, as Corusca Gems are rare – it could take several attempts to get all six.

Fight a ghost
Clicking the white crystals near the ruins in Ilum summons a Force Ghost with 200k+ health. Kill him and interact with the corpse to turn your ice into a Magenta Adegan Crystal.

Find a crafter
Deliver your hard-won ingredients to a crafter you trust. Making a usable crystal is a time-consuming process, and each one is unique so only one can be made at a time. It's considered polite to tip your crafter afterwards.

Show off
Stand around on the fleet station looking cool and waving your, er, pink lightsaber around. Prepare to be asked where you got it!

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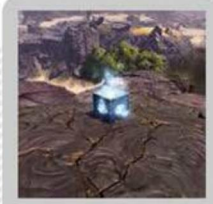
LEVEL 1-10 DATACRON LOCATIONS

Datacrons are hidden artefacts that provide permanent stat boosts and Matrix Cube shards

+2 Presence
On the northern shore of the Rust Yards there's a series of pipes leading out to an island. Climb along the pipes to reach this Datacron, which is guarded by reptilian Chemilizards.



+2 Aim
Visible on top of the central mountain when you approach Savrip Island from Oradam Village, you'll need to climb the rocks near the crashed spaceship to reach this Datacron.

Blue Matrix Shard
Follow a u-shaped bend in the tunnels that form part of the Heroic quest Factory Recall. The Datacron is behind a number of elite mobs, so bring a friend if you're under level 10.

HUTTA

+2 Aim
There's a Medical Droid in a small camp south of the Evocii Work Camp. Climb the fallen column nearby and follow the hill around to the right. The Datacron is found in a small alcove on the hillside.

+2 Presence
Walk south down the western shore of Mount Avilatan. As you get closer, the glow of the Datacron should eventually become visible at the far end of the beach.

+2 Willpower
On the way down to the tombs from the second camp, take a right up a hill to a small cliff. The Datacron should be in plain sight at the end of the path, overlooking the valley below.

KORRIBAN

Red Matrix Shard
Go to the Antechamber of the Tomb of Tulak Hord and follow the wall to the right. The Datacron is found near a corpse in a small ruin on the far side of the area.

+2 Endurance
Have a look for a way around the walls near the shuttle to the Orbital Station. The Datacron is located on a cliff edge on the other side, near an object that looks like a radar dish.

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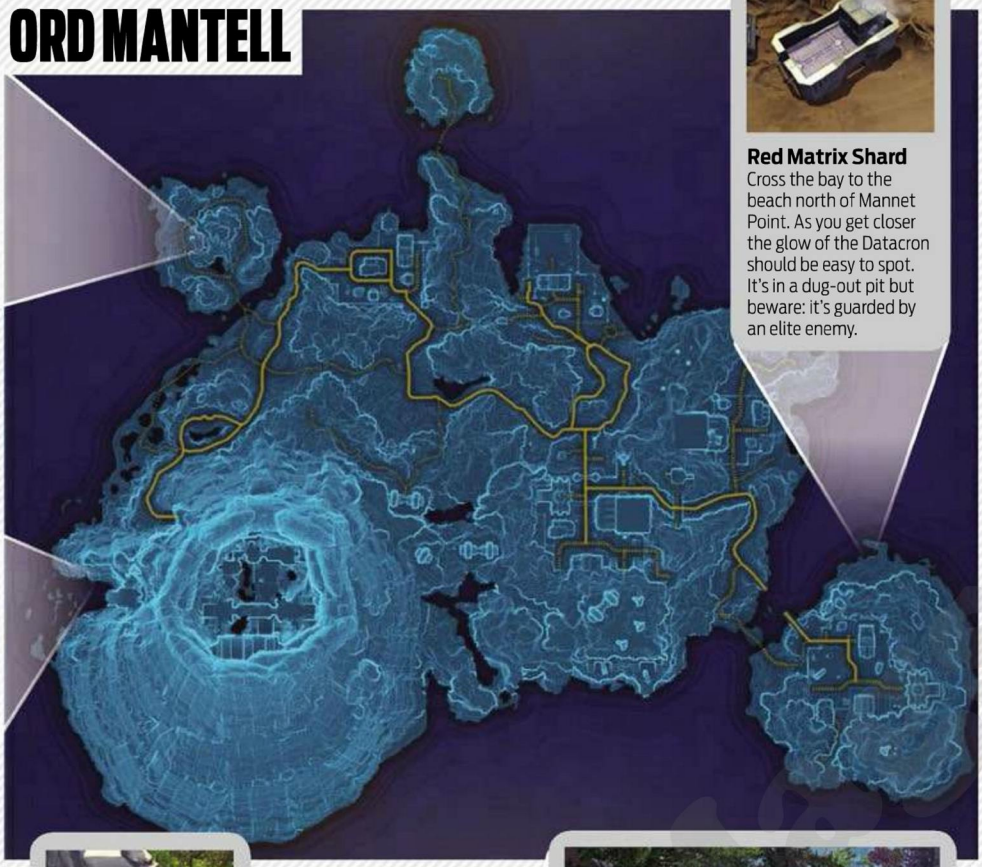
ORD MANTELL



Red Matrix Shard
Cross the bay to the beach north of Mannet Point. As you get closer the glow of the Datacron should be easy to spot. It's in a dug-out pit but beware: it's guarded by an elite enemy.

+2 Willpower
On the north-eastern side of the Ruins of Kaleth there's a building with a column leading up to a hole in the wall. Follow it and use the fallen pillar on the other side to reach the Datacron.

+2 Endurance
Find the cave mouth at the northernmost end of the Elarian Trail, just beyond the head of the river. Follow the tunnel to reach the Datacron on a ledge at the far end.

Blue Matrix Shard
Look for a gap in the western wall of the Forge. Follow the path around until you reach a ruin, which emerges out into a hidden grassy area with an elite mob and the Datacron.

TYTHON

MATRIX CUBES AND YOU

What to do with all those shards you find while you're Datacron hunting

ASSEMBLY
Combining shards grants you a stat-boosting Matrix Cube that fills a relic slot. The pieces are put together in an assembly vault – for the Republic, this is in the Jedi Temple Ruins on Coruscant. Imperials will find it on the way to the Dark Temple on Dromund Kaas. The cube you get depends on the colours you use, your level, and the order you place them in. Here are a few combinations to try.

LEVEL 15

Strength and Endurance

Aim and Endurance

Willpower and Endurance

LEVEL 24

Aim, Endurance, and Defence

Cunning, Endurance, and Critical

Willpower, Endurance, and Critical

Strength, Endurance, and Defence

LEVEL 32

Aim, Endurance, Shields, Defence

Willpower, Endurance

Cunning, Endurance, Critical

Strength, Endurance, Alacrity, Defence

LEVEL 50 (FORCE-SENSITIVE)

Strength, Endurance, Critical and Surge

Willpower, Endurance, and Critical

LEVEL 50 (NOT FORCE-SENSITIVE)

Aim, Endurance, and Critical

Cunning, Endurance, Critical and Surge

DISASSEMBLY:
As there are a finite amount of shards available, you may find yourself in need of a Reconstructed Disassembler Core. These are sold by Jawas on Tatooine for 8,000 credits. Imperials can buy them from Pitkth in Mos Ila, near the northernmost gate. For the Republic, there's a merchant called Kitpth by a Sandcrawler north of Anchorhead.

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STARCRAFT II

KNOWING WHAT TO LOOK FOR

How to respond to the three races' favourite opening tactics

Having a plan before a *StarCraft* match begins is important, but being able to respond to what your opponent does matters more. That's why being able to read an enemy's build order is crucial. This guide will help you figure out what you're going to face, and the best way for your chosen side to counter it.

The single most important bit of reconnaissance you'll do will be right at the start of the game – usually as you're building your third or fourth worker. Send a single unit to find the enemy base, and look for key structures that indicate what their long-term plan might be.

If there are empty starting locations on the map, send your scout to the nearest first and work clockwise or counter-clockwise from there. If the enemy finds you, they may try to chase your scout back to base – if you can spare the worker, this is an opportunity to lead them astray.

ZERG

ROACH/LING ALL-IN

WHAT IT MEANS

If he's already got a Roach warren and a spawning pool up, he's going on the offensive. Not upgrading the hatchery to a lair early on is a dead giveaway. Expect a reckless early push with a force of tough Roaches and cheap Zerglings.

RESPONSE

ZERG

Spine crawler

+

Roaches

You're defending, so you've got time to get a higher Roach count. Make the most of it.

PROTOSS

Sentries

If you spot them coming, you can forcefield the ramp indefinitely and build up an army.

TERRAN

Bunker

+

Marine

Manage to hold off the initial attack and the Zerg will be left way behind in terms of economy.

ICE FISHER BUILD

WHAT IT MEANS

Popularised by pro player Destiny, this build could mean you've got a squirming mass of Infestors coming your way: the Zerg's wriggly spell-casters. They can pin your forces down with fungal growths while Zerglings eat them.

RESPONSE

ZERG

Mutalisk

Infestors are expensive and slow. Hit your opponent at multiple locations with these.

PROTOSS

Stalkers

+

Blink

Get close to Infestors with blink and pop them. Roll right on through to your foe's home.

TERRAN

Tank

+

Ghost

Focus both units on them. Tanks will kill in a few shots; ghosts should use EMP or snipe.

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PROTOSS

3 GATE COLOSSUS

WHAT IT MEANS
Three gateways followed by expansion signifies an intention to build up a solid economy, but if he hasn't started that expansion yet, he's probably going straight to Colossi: robotic units devastating against massed ground forces.

RESPONSE

ZERG
Roach + Mutalisk
Colossi can't hit Mutalisks. Retreat with Roaches, wheel your Mutalisks around to hit their rear.

PROTOSS
Stalkers + Immortals
Immortals are cheaper than Colossi, and swat them down quickly. Support with Stalkers.

TERRAN
Vikings + Marauders
Marauders can take more Colossi punishment, and a few Viking volleys will take them down.

FORGE EXPAND

WHAT IT MEANS
He's got his forge and cannons blocking the entrance to his closest expansion, and has built or is building a second base. That means a big investment in economy and defence: he's not had too much time to get high-tech units.

RESPONSE

ZERG
Roach + Nydus network
Caught it early? Use a Zergling and Roach attack. Later on, use a Nydus worm to bypass the front.

PROTOSS
Nexus + Cannons
He's focused on economy. He can't attack while he's expanded, so go ahead and expand yourself.

TERRAN
Marines + Medivac
His starting base is likely unguarded. Research stim, fill up two medivacs, and drop your army in the back.

TERRAN

3 BARRACKS

WHAT IT MEANS
Your opponent may like barracks. Brace yourself for a strong, versatile force of what's commonly called MMM: Marines, Marauders and Medivacs. Marines are deadly, Marauders are tough, and Medivacs can drop them both on you.

RESPONSE

ZERG
Baneling + Zergling
Banelings will destroy Marines, Zerglings will nibble away at Marauders. They're cheaper, too.

PROTOSS
High Templar + Stalker
Use High Templars' psionic storm on clumps of foes, and a few units near your base to watch for drops.

TERRAN
Tanks + Marines
Biological units are smaller and susceptible to Tank cannon splash damage. Use Marines for support.

2 FACTORY

WHAT IT MEANS
Two early factories means a commitment to mechanical forces by the Terran. That means tough, expensive units that are good against numerous lighter ones. Expect a nasty push with tanks, Hellions and Thors.

RESPONSE

ZERG
Roach + Zergling
Roaches can absorb a lot of damage – a good frontline as your Zerglings sprint up to the tanks.

PROTOSS
Immortals + Stalkers
A good base of Stalkers provides covering fire for Immortals. These shred anything mechanical.

TERRAN
Banshees + Siege tanks
Try to out-produce your opponent on the ground. Mech is expensive and slow, so expand lots.

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LEAGUE OF LEGENDS

HOW TO...
Play *League of Legends*' Classic mode

The definitive *League of Legends* experience is still its Classic mode, which takes place on the Summoner's Rift map. And that's one hell of a confusing place for beginners. Your ultimate aim in all MOBAs (Multiplayer Online Battle Arenas) is to travel along one of three lanes towards your opponent's Nexus (which looks like a massive crystal). Once you're there, smash it up to win the whole match.

This would be easy if it wasn't for turrets, minions, and the opposition. Every 30 seconds, three sets of minions spawn from each team's Nexus. They follow the path of the lanes until they clash with the opposition's minions, then they fight each other. The carnage would go on forever if players didn't get involved. Your role is to change the course of the battle by killing your opponent's minions – then you can use your unobstructed critters as a meat shield or an extra attacking force to push deep into your enemy's territory.

There are three lanes – Top, Mid and Bot – each referring to their positions on the map. Teams usually place two heroes on the top and bottom lanes, and one on the middle, although tactics change from team to team and from match to match.

The less sharing you do, the more XP your character will gain, and the more powerful you will become.

But there's another danger. En route, you'll need to destroy three of your opponent's offensive turrets. They're extremely efficient hero-killers that prioritise targeting minions over heroes unless provoked. That means you can bring an appropriately-sized meat shield of minions and take one out in no time. Then you can continue to push.

At the end of each lane you'll find an Inhibitor: they look a bit like a Nexus except smaller and less significant. Take out a lane's Inhibitor and your Nexus will spawn super-minions – buff versions of your existing forces. Dominate enough lanes and your opponent's base will end up swarming with bad things hacking their Nexus. Unless they make one hell of a comeback it'll eventually pop, and you'll win the game! Congrats, bro.

LOL SKILLS
Six things you should probably know

1 FARMING
Stay within range of a minion as they go down and you'll gain XP that you can use to level. Gold is only awarded to the player who made the last hit on a minion, though. Time your attacks to finish off as many minions as possible, maximising your gains.

2 GANKING
Push too far down your lane, or cut through the jungle, and there's a chance you'll get killed by a coordinated team, giving them a heap of XP. Likewise, a winning team can get further ahead by ambushing vulnerable players. This is called ganking.

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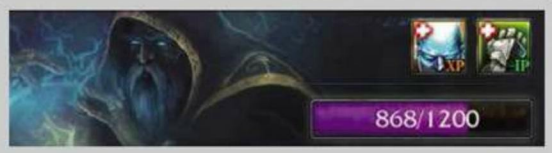
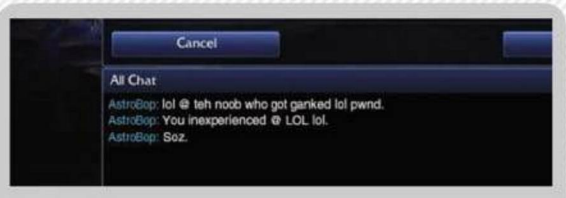
TOP TIPS...

You're on your way to becoming a legend



Don't quit

It doesn't matter how much of a kicking you're getting, do not leave a game before it's finished. You'll piss off the rest of your team, lose rank, and IP. Do it too much and you could potentially get banned.

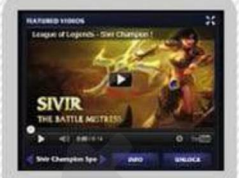


Don't get sad

Play to the best of your ability but don't get upset because of overly aggressive douchebags. *LoL* has a passionate army of competitive players who like to win. Remember that everyone was a noob once.

Don't get typecast

Play around with a few characters before settling down. Whether you love or hate your *LoL* experience often comes down to the character you've selected. Choosing whether you want to play a tank, DPS or support role is just the start.

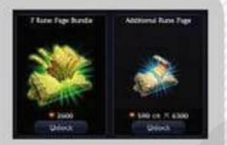


Become a couch potato

Riot have created a staggering amount of Champion Spotlight videos that highlight potential playstyles for each of the legends. These days, you can even watch them from within the game client. Just sit back and relax. Then sit up straight and take furious notes – this stuff is useful.

Bag yourself a bargain

The regular rotation of sale items in *League of Legend*'s store means that it's worth having a poke around the shelves every time you log in. If you're a fan of Teemo's playstyle but not his styling, for instance, a canon-shattering skin would be a good solution. Extra characters are arguably better value, though.



Become a consumer

Consumables in the item shop are vital for success. The recommended items are a good place to start, but they don't factor-in your opponent's strengths so can be misleading.

Become a master of masteries

Research a few potential builds on mobafire.com before laying down your skill points at level ten. Nothing is permanent though, so feel free to experiment with different loadouts as you level up.

Don't confuse currencies

You earn IP from playing, and RP from paying. You earn gold by kicking ass in-game. Most items can be bought with IP or RP, which stay in your account until spent, but cash-in gold by the end of the match or it's gone forever.

Make room for runes

Runes enhance your character's abilities: at level ten their effects are minor, but by level 30 they'll really boost your potential.

3 JUNGLING

The jungle is packed with high-powered minions who'll provide buffs if killed, some of which will affect the entire team. A good jungler will be in a prime ganking position, giving one player on your team the benefits of running a solo lane: extra gold and XP.

4 PUSHING

The act of playing offence on your designated lane. Push too hard and you'll get ganked; don't push hard enough and an aggressive player could end up farming your share of gold, leaving you weak in the late game. Certain characters excel at this aspect.

5 DOMINION

Dominion mode is concerned with control points and tickets, just like *Battlefield*'s Conquest mode. Matches are shorter and easier to grasp for beginners. The *LoL* hardcore still consider the Classic mode the definitive *LoL* experience, though.

6 FIELDS OF JUSTICE

Summoner's Rift is a map for two teams of five, whereas Twisted Treeline is a map designed for teams of three. We'd probably avoid the latter though – hardly anyone plays it anymore, and it might lead you into bad habits.

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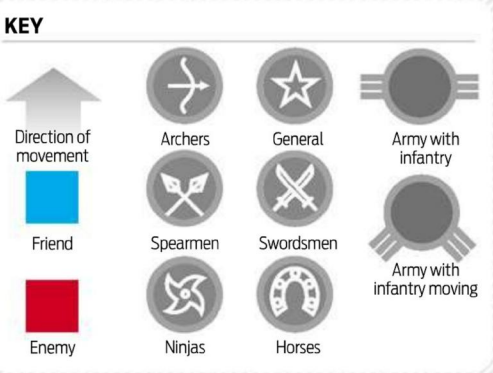
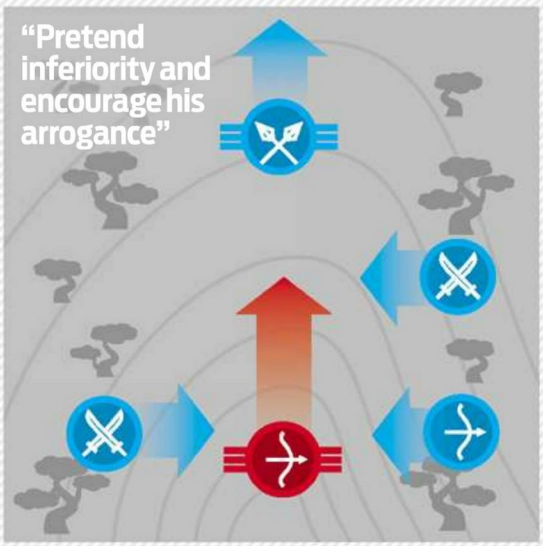
TOTAL WAR: SHOGUN 2

SUN TZU AND THE ART OF TACTICS

Adapt the legendary Chinese author's Art of War to work with Creative Assembly's superlative strategy game





Position your weakest forces in juicy places near forests and invite attack. Then, when your foe takes the bait, spring archers from the trees on both sides. The stragglers can be hit by hidden samurai behind the archers. In multiplayer games, make false starts and look indecisive to reel them in.

Form up and let your foe break himself on your rocks. High ground is vital: set up ranks of archers to pepper advancing targets, then move a rank of yari spear troops in front of your archers before cavalry hits. Have an escape route plotted for when you're about to be overwhelmed.

Use horses. Tim has won a staggering amount of battles by rolling up a ball of fighting horses and chucking them forward to break through enemy ranks. If the frontline bristles with too many yari blades, use different units to ride up and down the line, probing for weaknesses.

Be sneaky. Ninjas are ideal sneakers – able to enter the battlefield, turn invisible, and murder an enemy general. Deploy ninjas on the flank, and stick to wooded or out-of-the-way areas. Generals are often kept behind the battle line. Lie in wait until he's away from his troops, and make your attack.

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DREAM TEAM

Use our *FM2012* guide to the best cheap players

1 Yann Sommer
Age 22 / **Nationality** Swiss
Club Basel / **Estimated Price** £1.5m
Reflexes and handling are two of the most important stats for keepers, and Yann Sommer has the reflexes of a greased cat and hands covered in glue. A 'get out of jail free' card for leaky defences, and a quality addition to strong ones.

2 Sime Vrsaljko
Age 19 / **Nationality** Croatian
Club Dinamo / **Estimated Price** £1.5m
If Sime Vrsaljko hadn't realised how good he was at football, he could have been a marathon runner instead. His speed and stamina are perfectly suited to fullback, ensuring he'll still be bombing up and down the pitch long after his opponents have collapsed from exhaustion.

3 Fabian Monzon
Age 24 / **Nationality** Argentinian
Club Nice / **Estimated Price** £2.5m
Imagine if Gordon Freeman decided to employ his gravity gun to take set pieces. That's what it's like having Fabian Monzon on your team. He has a hammer of a left foot and his long throw ability would make even Rory Delap jealous.

4 Kara
Age 21 / **Nationality** Senegalese
Club Tromsø / **Estimated Price** £1.2m
Sometimes you just need someone who is capable of kicking the other team's heads in, and that's why we've bought Kara. A hulking brute, he's here to stop the opposition playing and give our more skillful players the back-up they need.

5 Siyanda Xulu
Age 19 / **Nationality** South African
Club Sundowns / **Estimated Price** £250k
Xulu is a giant of a defender, capable of winning nearly anything in the air. His positional skills are still raw, but give him a year working with more experienced players and he'll blossom into one of the best defenders in the world.

6 Leandro Gioda
Age 26 / **Nationality** Argentinian
Club Independiente / **Estimated Price** £130k
At 26, Gioda is the old man of the team (football years are like dog years), but he's still a rock capable of slotting into any defence in the world. Even better, his club inexplicably don't value him and have transfer listed him for a mere £130,000.

7 Cidinho
Age 18 / **Nationality** Brazilian
Club Botfago / **Estimated Price** £2.5m
Ever wondered why Brazilian footballers have nicknames? It's because their real ones are so complicated. Thankfully Alcides de Souza Faria Junior goes by 'Cidinho' instead. He'll bring some South American flair to the right flank.

8 Marco Verratti
Age 18 / **Nationality** Italian
Club Pescara / **Estimated Price** £1m
Most 18-year-olds can't run a washing machine, never mind a premiership midfield, but Marco Verratti has the technique to take on men years his senior. Grab him now and he'll be the heart of your team for years to come.

9 Alberto Paloschi
Age 21 / **Nationality** Italian
Club Chievo / **Estimated Price** £3m
Paloschi is a pure predator. He exists for only one reason: to score goals. We're not even sure if he eats or sleeps any more. Regardless his clinical finishing make this former Milan youngster one of the deadliest strikers in the game.

10 Federico Santander
Age 20 / **Nationality** Paraguayan
Club Guarani / **Estimated Price** £1.5m
Sometimes football games get ugly, dirty and brutal, and for times like that you need someone who can use his head, and not in the smart way. Towering Paraguay youngster Federico Santander is here for just that reason.

11 'Hobbit' Bermudez
Age 24 / **Nationality** Mexican
Club Atlante / **Estimated Price** £1.5m
Bermudez's diminutive size may have earned him the nickname 'Hobbit', but it doesn't make him any less intimidating on the pitch. Play him on the left wing and he'll not only walk into Mordor, but round their keeper for an easy tap in.

SKIN SENSE Make *Football Manager 2012* look more sexy, less texty

STEKLO
bit.ly/fmsteklo
Demand for *FM* skin Steklo is so high that the most recent release came with the simple message from the creator: 'Now leave me alone'. Poor guy. Nice skin though.

NETBOOK
bit.ly/fmnetbook
Football Manager is the perfect game for your netbook, and this skin optimises the interface for netbook screens so you can squeeze in a couple of matches on the train.

FLEX
bit.ly/fmflexskin
Flex has been around for years, and is particularly beloved of lefties as it allows them to flip the interface around to better suit their weird mutant hands.

NEUE
bit.ly/fmneueskin
Neue might have too many vowels for its own good but it's still an excellent skin, and its use of icons makes the text-heavy *FM* interface a little more user friendly.

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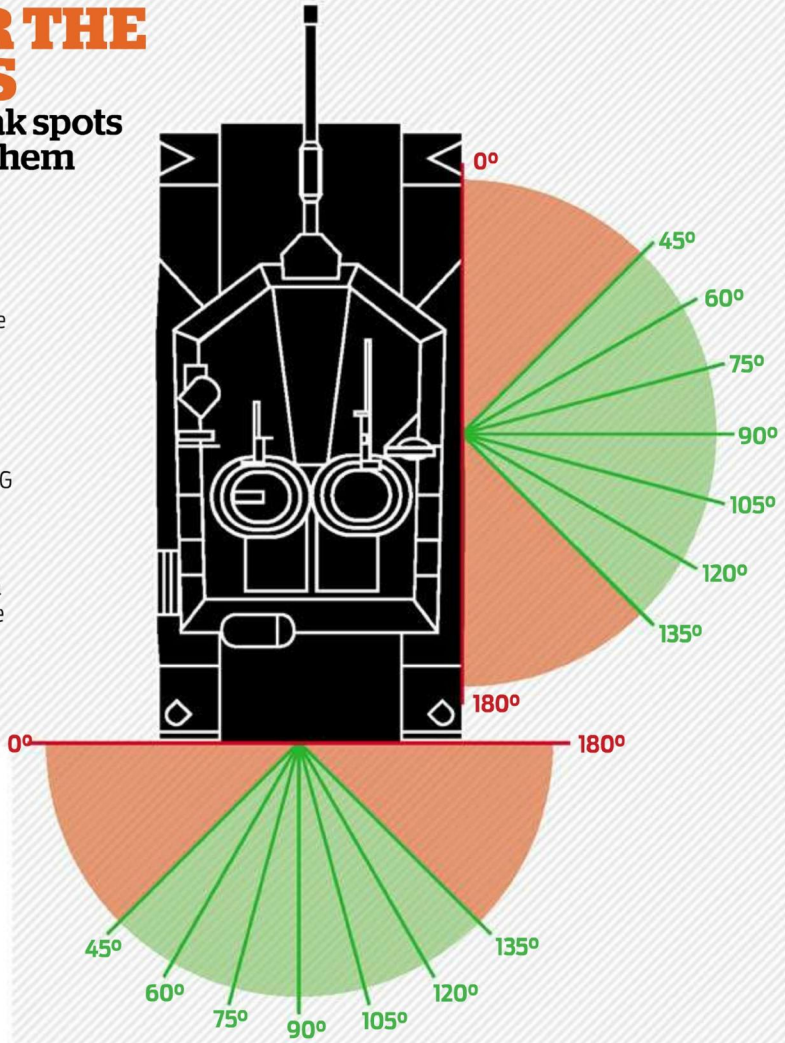
BATTLEFIELD 3

TANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Where a tank's weak spots are and how to hit them

Whichever *Battlefield 3* mode you're playing, give priority to taking out enemy armour, as it will shoot you, out-run you and probably run over you. As ever, a tank's backside is its weakest spot – so always try to sneak around behind the vehicle and fire at it from a distance, to ensure that you've got more time to hide between shots.

If the angle you fire your SMAW/RPG from is perpendicular, it will cause greater damage, so it's worth considering the position that you engage it from. Also most repairs on a tank are done from the rear or the side – so there's a good chance the blast will kill the engineer if he's got his sparkler out.



INFO	Side damage	Rear damage
0-45°	22	36
60°	27	44
75°	31	53
90°	36	61
105°	31	53
120°	27	44
135-180°	22	36

K/D FTW

Eight ways to ramp up your K/D ratio

KILL MORE

DIE LESS

1 Tweak your settings
It's worth spending a decent amount of time tweaking your settings to suit your playing style. Run your resolution high and your other settings low or disabled if you love beautiful stats and awards more than a beautiful game.

2 Camp
It's a tired old tactic and infuriating for opponents, but lying on your belly at the edge of the map with a sniper rifle and a roof over your head to avoid mortars will reel in the filthy kills. Shift yourself after every batch of kills to avoid being counter-sniped.

5 Use smoke
Equipping smoke as the assault class is an undervalued ace up your sleeve. It's instrumental in blanketing open ground in an infantry rush, and offers a visual barrier when planting M-Coms as an attacker, and when defusing them as a defender.

6 Flank
In just about any game mode, flanking around the edges of a map is an effective way to manoeuvre without being killed, as it halves the number of angles that you can get hit from. Using squad run will make flanking quicker to account for the extra mileage.

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HOW TO...
Defuse an M-Com without getting dead

Use an EOD bot
If you're a happy camper, go engineer and equip yourself an EOD bot. Find some sneaky crates/boxes/bushes near your objective and reverse the EOD bot into them, facing the objective. This will allow you to go off on your own wild adventures but offers the ability to make a remote defuse should the enemy get close enough to your M-Com to plant. If you're on it like Gromit you may even be able to repair him to death with the bot, just for gits and shiggles.

Smoke it
When an enemy M-Com plant is inevitable, use the assault class and take smoke instead of a health box. Once the plant has been made, place your smoke on the enemy side of the objective and make your push to disarm. It's worth bearing in mind that firing smoke from a further distance will result in a wider dispersal and therefore better cover, and that if you smoke it too late or too soon you will actually be providing enemy cover for their attack.

De-tour
On the approach to a defuse, never run directly onto the M-Com unless absolutely necessary. If possible, run towards the enemy spawn zone but parallel and close to your live objective. The last thing that enemy M-Com planters are looking for is an attack towards their lines. Their eyes will be on the objective, so you have to run towards their positions around the objective, neutralise them and then double back to make your defuse.

3 Clay some more
These offer possibly the most disgustingly underhand kill of the game, but nonetheless are a surefire way to work your way up the scoreboard. Pop claymores on the insides of doorways and tight to corners for shifty bangs.

4 Get tanked up
An empty tank and a friend nearby to repair you is a ticket to a string of dirty murders. Angle Tanks at 45º during a fire fight to allow your gunner to hop out and repair, and don't be afraid to seat switch during reloads or vehicle lock-ons.

7 Don't pursue vendettas
If someone kills you, don't waste time hunting him down after your next respawn. Revenge kills are a poor motivation for an attack, and more often than not you'll waste even more lives attempting a vendetta. Keep your cool.

8 Zig and zag
The majority of enemies you meet will be facing your base, so people slower on the draw should attack in a zig-zag manoeuvre across the map, meaning when you engage enemies you're hitting them at 90º rather than face to face.

WIN MORE BATTLES

We ask our very own clan leader John Strike how he got his 3.17 W/L ratio.

BL username StryK_uK
Team deltastriketeam.com
Time played 181h 18m
Kills 12,934
K/D ratio 1.754
Weapon of choice AEK-971 + KOBRA (RDS) + laser sight + 320 smoke

Blam-trac

Amtracs are the single most decisive instrument on the battlefield and a significant factor in the fate of any match.

As an attacker, make sure you make full use of your Amtrac, with one squad member driving, one gunning, one repairing, and one planting objectives and support repairing.

As a defender, make it your absolute priority to destroy the enemy's Amtrac before it haemorrhages enemies all over your base. It's as important to lob a grenade towards the rear of the vehicle to kill its repairing engineer(s) as it is to pound rockets into its face. The Amtrac is a castle on tracks.

Ganging and banging
Working in pairs in small scrims or as full squads in large battles can easily change the fate of a game – so squad up. Remember to coordinate each squad member into using different perks and try to be aware of where you all are on the map. Make full use of spawning on each other – but once you do, be sure to disperse or else a single grenade will kill everyone.

Mumble in the jungle

You'll find teamwork ten times easier if you use a headset and microphone, so it's worth having Teamspeak 3, Mumble and Ventrillo already installed. Few people use *Battlefield 3*'s built-in voice chat so using third-party software is what most regular players prefer. Expect swearing, French people, and casual microphone flatulence.

A man with a clan
It may take you a few tries to find it, but joining the right clan will offer another level of teamwork and support that goes beyond the game and makes you feel like part of a community. You'll find that you bounce ideas, tricks, tweaks and just general gaming knowledge between one another, whether in live chat or on forums. As well as being a solid basis for idea sharing, an active clan will mean whatever time of day you come online you're able to brush shoulders with like-minded players, which will in turn yield good results in games. Depending on how seriously you take the game, there are plenty of other good teams to play against and a limited number of competitive leagues.

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TEAM FORTRESS 2

CHANGE YOUR CLASS

A fun alternate build for each of the nine classes, and what you'll need for it

THE ASSASSIN SCOUT

EQUIPMENT
1. The Force-A-Nature
2. Bonk
3. The Fan O'War

PURPOSE
Quaff the Bonk just before reaching the front line: it'll let you sprint invincibly past everyone. If they give chase, a double-blast with the Force-A-Nature will send them flying. If not, sneak up on them with the Fan O'War: they'll take mini-crits for 15 seconds, and the Force will finish them off.

THE ATTRITION SOLDIER

EQUIPMENT
1. The Black Box
2. The Buff Banner
3. The Equalizer

PURPOSE
The Black Box gives you health if you so much as glance an enemy with an explosion, and if you do get hurt, the Equalizer helps you run to the nearest medkit. As you keep dealing damage, your chance of critical hits goes up, and so does your Buff Banner charge. When it's ready, you and all your friends deal mini-crits.

THE AMBUSH HEAVY

EQUIPMENT
1. Tomislav
2. Sandvich
3. Gloves of Running Urgently

PURPOSE
The Gloves let the Heavy sprint to the front line, but he'll steadily lose health. Run to a medkit in the enemy's territory, then find a corner to hide in on the enemy's route to the front. Snack on your sandvich if you're still hurt. You can keep your Tomislav spinning: it's silent, so no one will know you're there until too late.

THE COMBAT SPY

EQUIPMENT
1. The Big Earner
2. The Dead Ringer
3. The Enforcer

PURPOSE
The Enforcer is a lethal pistol, its only drawback is increasing your cloaking time. With the Dead Ringer, your cloaking time is always instant when you take damage. Disguise while cloaked, decloak in a secluded spot, and backstab someone with the Big Earner. It refills your cloak meter, and you can Dead Ringer again.

THE SKIRMISH ENGINEER

EQUIPMENT
1. The Gunslinger
2. The Wrangler
3. The Widowmaker

PURPOSE
The Widowmaker uses metal, but also gains it when you hit. Use its relentless damage to force your way to a sneaky spot with an ammo box, then slap down a mini-sentry with the Gunslinger. It'll protect you, and if you run out of Widowmaker metal, you can use the Wrangler to shoot with your sentry.

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THE UNSTOPPABLE DEMOMAN

EQUIPMENT
1. The Loch-n-Load
2. The Chargin' Targe
3. The Persian Persuader

PURPOSE
The Targe makes you absurdly tough vs explosions and fire, and propels you into battle. The Persian Persuader halves the recharge time on that ability, does critical hits while charging, and heals you for every bit of ammo you pick up. If you mess up the charge, use the Loch-n-Load.

THE MICTURAL SNIPER

EQUIPMENT
1. The Huntsman
2. Jarate
3. The Bushwacka

PURPOSE
The Huntsman makes you a more mobile and closer-range sniper. That goes well with the Jarate, which makes enemies take minor critical hits from all damage. Except the Bushwacka: a brutal knife that does full, usually fatal critical damage to anyone covered in urine.

THE COMBO PYRO

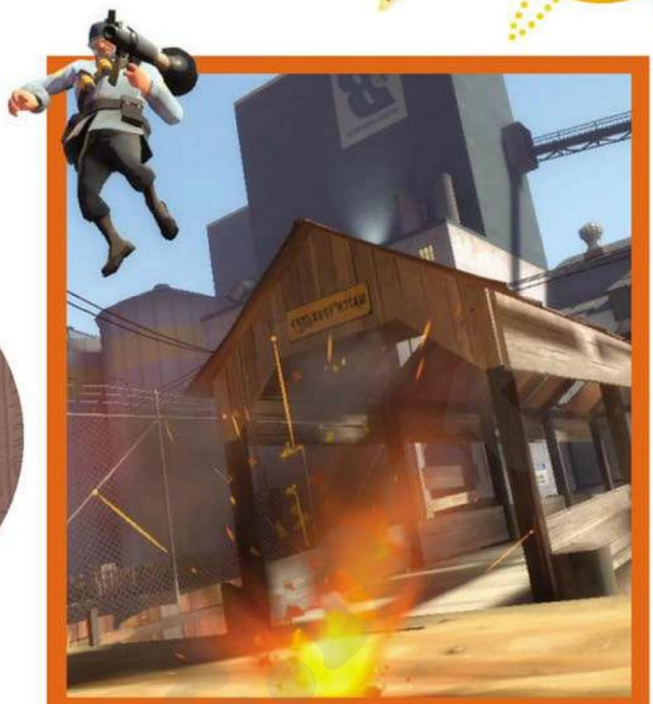
EQUIPMENT
1. Flare Gun
2. Degreaser
3. Axtinguisher

PURPOSE
The Degreaser's only advantage is faster weapon switching. But the Flare Gun was recently tweaked to deal a brutal 91 damage to burning opponents. That means you only have to catch most classes in your fire, then insta-switch to the Flare Gun to finish them off. If the critical doesn't kill them, the flames will.

THE PARAMEDIC

EQUIPMENT
1. The Quick Fix
2. The Solemn Vow
3. The Crusader's Crossbow

PURPOSE
The Quick Fix lets you latch onto a Scout to travel at the same speed as him. In the fray, it can heal the most injured team-mates faster than any other tool. Meanwhile the Solemn Vow lets you see the health levels of enemies: when you spot one who's injured, snipe him with the Crossbow – it has no charge-up time.



ACTUAL PRO TIPS

We asked three competitive *Team Fortress 2* players for advice about their specialist class

1 THE HEAVY

Pro ALX
Team SNSD
Recommended loadout Minigun, Sandvich, Gloves of Running Urgently

Healing
Always throw the Sandvich (right-click) on the ground right in front of you to heal yourself or your medic, never eat it (very rare exceptions).

Spies
Checking for spies is best done by quickly turning around a few seconds after you've started to fire at an enemy – that's when good spies will stab.

Targeting
Generally, target whoever can deal the most damage to you first. But take into account how long it will take for you to kill them: closer enemies are quicker to kill.

2 THE ENGINEER

Pro Beef
Team SNSD
Recommended loadout Gunslinger, Frontier Justice, Wrangler

The Gunslinger
Minisentries are great! Even on defence. They're disposable and give you a lot of time to focus on your other buildings. The Wrangler lets them absorb much more damage.

Sentry placement
No Sentry spot is a bad sentry spot. Try to be creative. The 'bad' spots will often catch players off guard.

Tactics
When playing ninja-engineer, try to attack from a different angle from where your sentry is. It gets quite easy to lure people into the sentry and disorient them.

3 THE SPY

Pro SabaSaba
Team Colony
Recommended loadout Enforcer, Dead Ringer

Defence
When defending, wait for the enemy to start their push. When they are pushing, they are usually distracted and can be backstabbed easily.

Intel
You can check what weapons the enemy medic is using when disguised as an enemy medic. Use this intelligence and pass it on to your teammates.

Stabbing
Backstabbing is not about backs. It is about the Spy being within a 180° range behind the enemy. It doesn't matter if you hit him in the arm or the spine.

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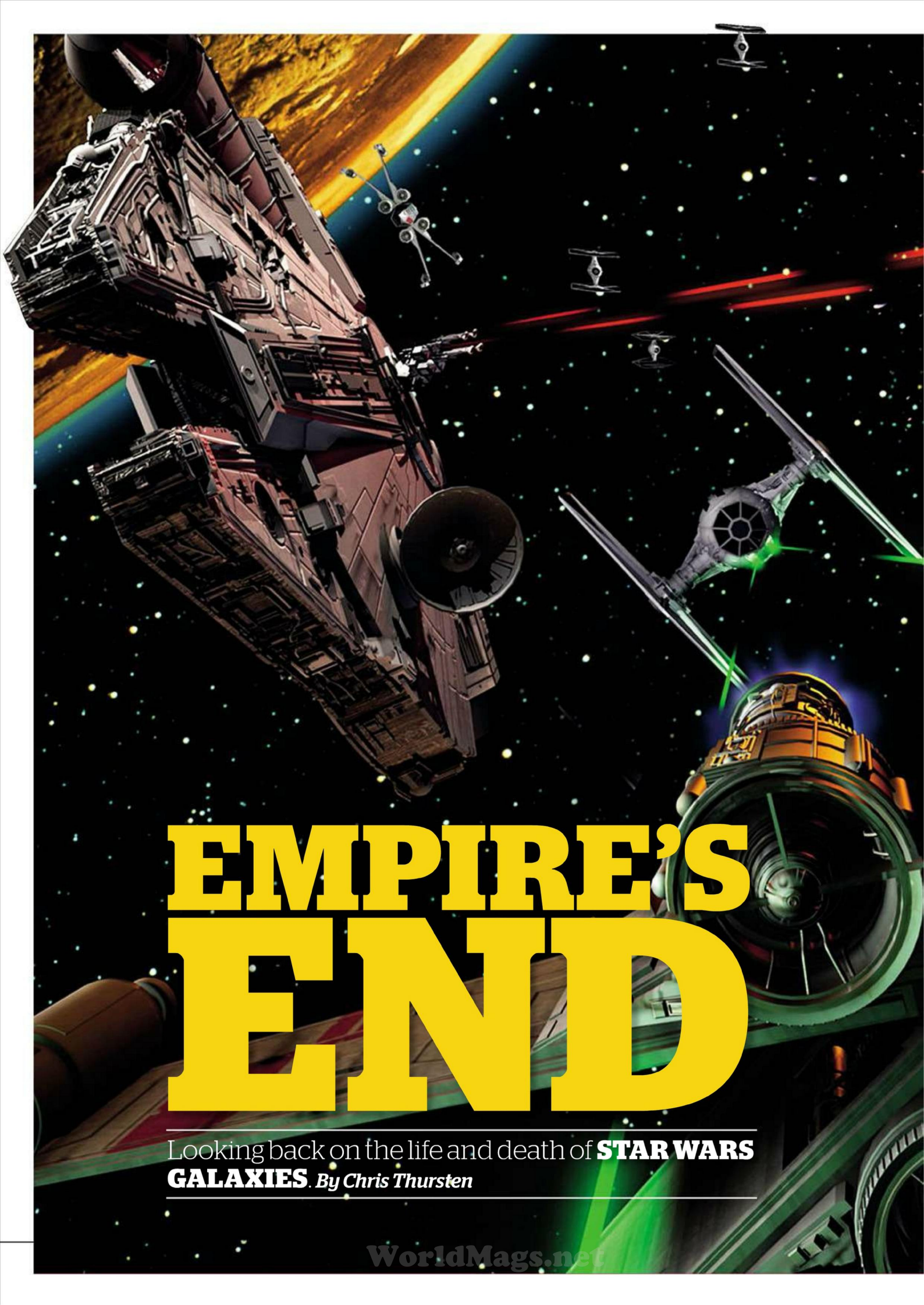

EMPIRE'S END

Looking back on the life and death of **STAR WARS GALAXIES**. *By Chris Thursten*

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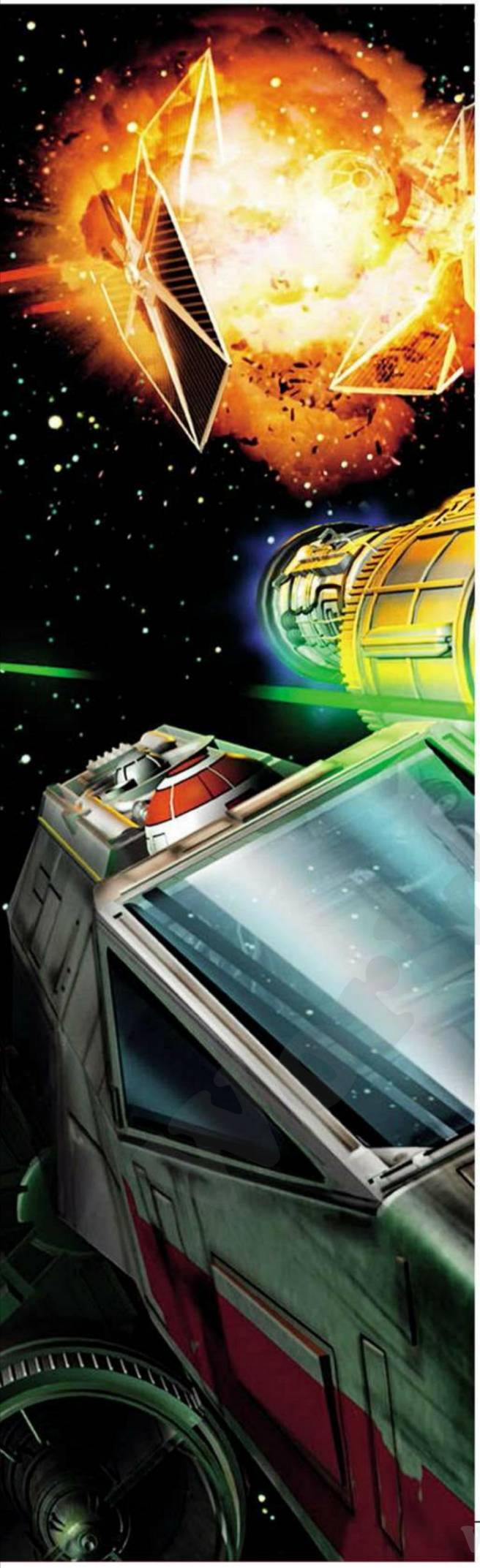

At midnight on the 15th of December, in server farms across the USA and Europe, Sony Online Entertainment finally pulled the plug on *Star Wars Galaxies*. The MMO's eight-year life ended as players gathered for the last time outside Jabba's Palace, did battle in the skies over Naboo and Corellia, and fought for galactic supremacy on the forest moon of Endor. With nothing left to lose, the game's final hours were a free-for-all, a farewell and a celebration: the developers' own spectacular send-off running alongside those organised by players.

Galaxies began life with *EverQuest* developer Verant Interactive, and was the work of *Ultima Online* lead designer Raph Koster. It was therefore the direct descendant of the two most important and formative games in its genre – but of the two, *Ultima* provided most of the genetic material. Despite bearing the trappings of a 3D action-RPG, the original design for *Star Wars Galaxies* was of a simulated online world – something closer to *EVE Online* than *World of Warcraft*.

Content was generated by players as they made their way through a freeform skill system, where abilities were grouped within professions that could be hybridised at will. The economy was entirely player-run, with everything from clothing to droids, buildings and furniture crafted from the ground up.

The beginning

Its scale was often daunting, as was the degree of freedom it offered to players. *Galaxies*' planets were huge and partially randomly generated, larger than they needed to be for the content they contained. There were few formal quests, but dynamic missions that placed a monster nest or bandit camp some distance away, gave you a waypoint, and told you to get going.

Your progress was measured by your status and resources rather than any fixed scale and, as the game aged, players found more and more ways to express themselves. Every item was rendered in 3D, and could be placed at will within the game's houses. This led both to interior decorating contests and to sprawling player cities and sculptures made from dozens of tiny components. This aspect of the game was an accident, but a happy one originating from SOE's attention to internally coherent simulation.

My life in *Galaxies* began in Mos Eisley on Tatooine. I harboured dreams of becoming a weapon-crafting smuggler, selling illegally modified blasters on the galactic market and using the money to fund hunting expeditions.

I exterminated womp rats to raise the money for a small house and some copper extractors, which in turn allowed me to establish a mining operation 15 minutes from the city. The extractors processed ore in real time, and I'd make that journey several times a day to empty their storage units and place the raw materials up for sale while I worked on my crafting.

I played for weeks without leaving the planet I started on, and it never occurred to me that I needed to roam in order to get the full experience. That sense of occupying a living universe, even a small part of it, compensated for the lack of variety. When I did get off-world, it was an achievement. I bought an expensive blaster from a merchant in a player

"I played for weeks without leaving the planet I started on"

city on Tatooine and caught the public shuttle to Corellia, and then on to the hunting grounds of Dantooine. The former's urban sprawl and the latter's temperate wilds hit me in succession. This wasn't simply discovering a new zone: this was travelling.

The emphasis was always on player interaction. If you weren't born a Wookiee, you couldn't understand their language unless you found a player to teach you. If a series of defeats had left you with permanent dents in your vital statistics, it would be a player who patched you up. When this worked, it created a world where the medical centres and cantinas in popular cities were packed with people not simply occupying space but doing their jobs, making credits and interacting in a manner supported by the game's mechanics. When it didn't work, *Star Wars Galaxies* became haphazard and prone to exploitation. There was so much potential variety within the skill system that imbalances were rife from the start.

Galaxies arrived at a changing time in the life of Star Wars. When it was announced, the impact of the prequel movies hadn't yet been fully felt. As a *Star Wars* game, it was born from the same sentiment as the X-Wing ▸

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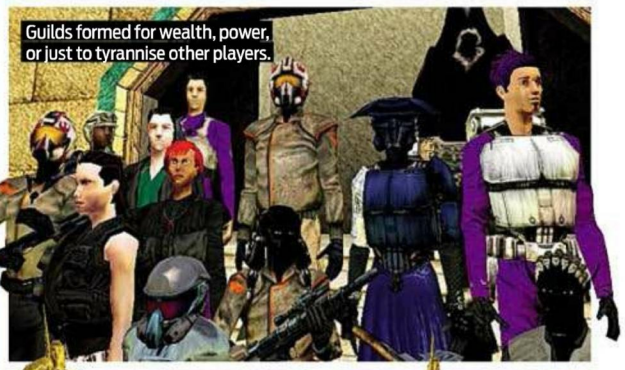
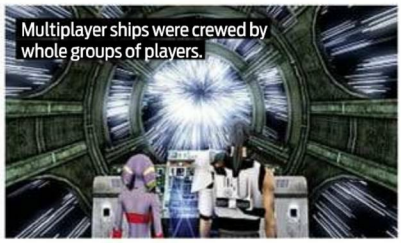
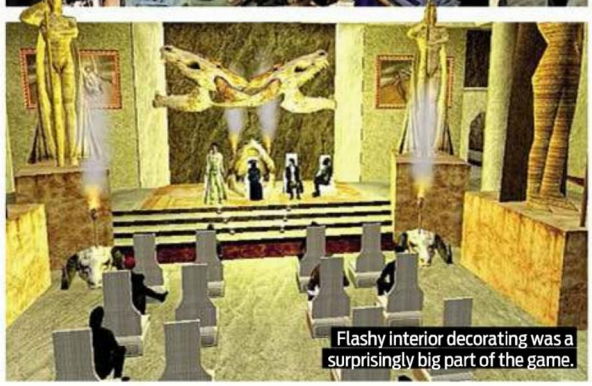
Ships could be personalised with paintjobs and unique components.


Guilds formed for wealth, power, or just to tyrannise other players.

Speeders were essential to traverse *Galaxies*' massive worlds.


Multiplayer ships were crewed by whole groups of players.


Flashy interior decorating was a surprisingly big part of the game.

games, *Dark Forces*, and the Expanded Universe books and comics. These had a tendency to perceive the Star Wars universe as a setting with certain rules and themes, rather than as a collection of iconic characters and archetypal experiences – ideal for a persistent online world, but less so for a franchise that was becoming increasingly dominated by archetypes and icons.

Indeed, when dramatic changes were eventually made to *Galaxies*, those two words were repeatedly used to justify them.

Find the Force

There was one particular absence that stood out: the Force. *Star Wars Galaxies* was set in the time between A New Hope and The Empire Strikes back, a period with only three extant Jedi – a muppet, a chronic asthmatic, and a teenager desperate to go to Tosche Station for some power converters. While there's precedent within PC gaming for Star Wars games without the slightest whiff of a lightsaber, the preeminence of Jedi within the prequel movies meant that, in *Galaxies*' case, it wouldn't last.

It wasn't as simple as *Galaxies* not having Jedi, however; instead, it

Force sensitives were intended to be rare and powerful: difficult to play but an asset to their faction

treated them as the fiction would. In the Star Wars universe, it is possible for unique individuals to be born with Force sensitivity, and so it was with the game. The first player Jedi appeared from nowhere in November 2003, and the resultant outcry from players who wanted in on the action caused SOE to rethink the opaque system they'd established.

Force sensitives were intended to be rare, powerful and persecuted: difficult to play, but a major asset to the factions they joined. These kinds of imbalances can have a positive impact on a player-driven MMO, because they encourage stories to emerge, but this wasn't the case with *Galaxies*. Fearing their subscribers' discontent, SOE opened up Force sensitivity to everyone.

When created, each character was invisibly assigned a random array of professions, mastery of which would unlock the Jedi character slot. These could be a matched set – marksman, scout and bounty hunter, for example – or entirely different. Rare Jedi artefacts called holocrons could reveal one of your assigned professions at a time, and as a gesture of goodwill SOE gave one holocron to every player.

Imagine if everyone in the country woke up one morning with a letter on their doorstep offering them a million pounds to immediately swap jobs with someone else. That, in essence, is what the holocron giveaway unleashed: a mass mid-life crisis where armoursmiths became bounty hunters and bounty hunters became doctors and doctors became dancers. Interdependencies between professions collapsed: now, the game had a singular goal. Whether you were a PvPer looking to stay competitive or you wanted a Jedi for the prestige, *Star Wars Galaxies* amounted to the pursuit of two things: holocrons and experience.

There was no ignoring it, even for those with no interest in Force sensitivity. Hunting and selling holocrons became the biggest game in town. Anyone with a profession that could speed up the levelling process – particularly doctors and their essential buffs – had it made, while almost everyone else inhabited a broken economy.

Then Jedi started to appear in greater numbers, and the inevitable happened: the class that was intended to be rare and powerful became

A LONG TIME AGO... A TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS IN THE LIFE OF *STAR WARS GALAXIES*

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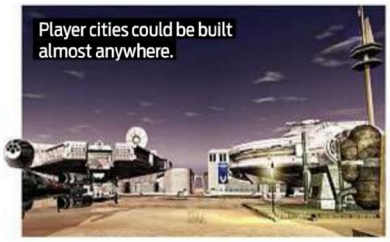
Relive A New Hope by flying backwards under a Star Destroyer.

A Rebel guild briefs its pilots before a sortie.


Player cities could be built almost anywhere.

undervalued and overpowered. The system was thrown out in early 2004, when Jedi were formalised within a late-game questing structure.

The holocron crisis, while by no means the last of *Galaxies*' problems, demonstrates the game's struggle to resolve the conflict between big-name licensing and experimental design. The scarcity of Jedi – enforced by both the fiction and the developer's vision for dynamic player-generated storytelling – created vocal demand that was bolstered by the prequels' renewed focus on lightsaber-swinging. This demand in turn lead SOE to give players what they wanted, at the expense of the game's original vision.

Game enhancements

The furore also exposed underlying problems with the game's basic mechanics, necessitating the first of *Galaxies*' overhauls. The Combat Upgrade revised existing systems, giving players a level based on the amount of experience invested but not abandoning skills and professions entirely. These changes were then themselves replaced, only a few months later, by a second and far more substantial change in direction: the New Game Enhancements.

The NGE removed the skill system, replacing the 32 original professions with nine traditional RPG classes, now including Jedi. Everyone was given a series of story quests to take them through the new levelling system, and *WoW*-like talent trees were added.

The intent was to save the game by finding a new audience, one for whom the new systems would be more familiar. The link to Episode III's marketing was made explicit with a pair of movie-themed expansions, *Rage of the Wookiees* and *Trials of Obi-Wan*. These added new planets with linear zones, high-level quest lines, and exclusive loot. The old *Galaxies* – the one where you'd drive across a desert to buy a blaster from another player – was still there, but buried underneath an entirely different game.

A major part of *Galaxies* was however left untouched by these changes: space combat. Added in 2004's *Jump To Lightspeed* expansion, players could join Rebel, Imperial or neutral navies and engage in twitch-based dogfighting in massive space sectors. Loading up a custom-built droid with the right software allowed your ship to shunt power through various subsystems, a legitimate successor to the much-loved *X-Wing* and *TIE Fighter* games.

Multiplayer vessels could be decorated like houses, placing furniture to create the sense of a lived-in space. The dream of owning your very own Millennium Falcon was, for a short time, a reality.

It was this scope for creativity, ownership and self-expression that ultimately defined *Galaxies*. The 2009 Chronicles system allowed players to create quests and place NPCs and scenery, reinforcing what had long been the case: that given a broad enough sandbox to play in, the community could generate extraordinary things.

Storytelling communities self-organised into factions and played out ongoing narratives, year on year. I eventually became that weapon-slicing smuggler, and subsequently a bounty hunter in the service of a criminal faction based on Naboo. We'd clash with other gangs on the streets of Tatooine, occupying player-run cantinas to indicate ownership. My character bore the scars of a run-in with an Imperial strike force in the form of a low-tech cybernetic arm. Nothing in the game enforced it, but I wore that chunk of metal because it was a part of my character's life.

Stories like this were a direct consequence of the generosity and depth of the original game design, married with SOE's willingness to hand players ever-greater control over their experiences. Modern MMOs are about reliable, repeatable fun: *Galaxies* was something considerably riskier and – when it worked – more worthwhile.

Awkward, compromised but special, *Star Wars Galaxies* deserves to be remembered for what it tried to achieve, for what it managed to achieve, and for what it allowed its players to achieve. ■

...IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY Fabled settings brought to life by *Galaxies*

The Sarlacc Pit
Jabba's terrifying rubbish bin was one of Tatooine's less well-kept secrets. Don't fall in – but if you do, at least you'll die instantly. That's a good thing: in the movies, you're looking at a few thousand years of being digested slowly.

The Maw
A crucial part of the Kessel Run, this black hole cluster is why Han Solo measures speed in distance rather than time (it's complicated.) In *Galaxies*, the Maw was visible from Kessel, a high-level space zone where players hunted for enemy capital ships.

The Gungan Sacred Place, Naboo
This is the clearing where Star Wars' most annoying characters gathered prior to being shot by battle droids in The Phantom Menace. *Galaxies* allowed you to hunt Gungans with a flamethrower. It will be greatly missed.

Rebel Base, Corellia
Following the destruction of the Death Star, the Rebel Alliance decided to hide in a massive walled compound on one of the galaxy's most populous worlds, displaying a lot of faith in Imperial incompetence.

The Tomb of Exar Kun
The legendary Dark Lord haunted these ruins on the Yavin IV's moon and acted as a raid boss. Nearby Massassi temples housed the Dark and Light Jedi factions when Force sensitives were revamped later in *Galaxies*' life.

MAY 2005
Rage of the Wookiees is the first movie-themed content expansion...

NOVEMBER 2005
...followed by *Trials of Obi-Wan*. The New Game Enhancements totally overhaul levelling, crafting, and combat (again).

JUNE 2006
The Galactic Civil War is upgraded with new PvP battlegrounds.

NOVEMBER 2008
The ice planet Hoth is added, complete with the Battle for Echo Base.

SEPTEMBER 2009
The Chronicle system allows players to create their own quests.

AUGUST 2011
The Galactic Civil War is expanded to include space.

DECEMBER 2011
The Rebels win the Galactic Civil War on the majority of servers, and *Star Wars Galaxies* is shut down for good.

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Sith, silliness and seriously bad language

SPK UR MND

■ Allow me to apologise for sending you a whole gaggle of crap letters a few months back. I had some root canal work done and these painkillers they gave me made me feel funny.
John Morris
Really? Excellent tip, sir. We'll book all of our writers in for surgery immediately. No more reviews without Ibuprofen!

■ Steam stinks! I bet you don't print that in your magazine.
David Cussell
You lost your bet. You're also a silly.

■ Just to say, can I have waffles?
Mark Cussons
You can certainly have waffle. Try asking Owen about his Sith Marauder, for example. (You might want to bring a pillow.)

■ With regards to your reply to Robert Roemer's letter about his hatred of American Dickbags A douchebag is for cleaning your asshole, and one would assume a dickbag is for cleaning ones knob end. No need to thank me.
Steven Higgins
Splendid. Then we won't.

■ Look how BioWare jacked the story for *Mass Effect 1* and *2* from Accolade's *Star Control*. *http://bit.ly/zx8DW2*
Anthony F
Only if *Star Control* has the patent on spaceships and precursor aliens, which we're pretty sure it doesn't. Ask TV Tropes, they'll know.

On the premises

Ahhh, it's New Year's day. I'm feeling a little delicate, but that's OK. It's a public holiday and I'm not at work. Time to stay in, sit back and get some *Might & Magic Heroes VI* enjoyment.

"Conflux connection failed. Check your internet connection."

Of course. Check *my* connection, because it's surely implausible that Conflux isn't working, now isn't it? Since my internet connection isn't working then I guess this email will go nowhere.

Well, my PC Gamer brothers and sisters. Do we have any politicians and law experts among us? Any chance we can get such silliness as permanent internet requirement for offline games (and other non-game services) prohibited? It's like going to a chip shop and not being allowed to eat anywhere other than on the premises.
Roy Wood

If you have a working internet connection, *M&MH VI* looks like this.

It would be lovely to see an end to this, but don't hold your breath. All they have to do is claim the always-on part is a feature rather than DRM, and the only way to fight it would also take a knife to everything from* TF2 *to* World of Warcraft. *All we can do is fight with our wallets – and it seems to work. As annoying as this DRM is, Ubisoft have backed down on the more intrusive version from last year.
PCG

Killing? Fine. Conquest? Cool. But no bad language. That's rude.

"I had an email from EA, informing me my account was banned"

A badass country

My name is Roger, I have a moustache and this is my *Battlefield* story. I bought *BF3* the day it was released, then later, attempted to join a server only to be greeted by the message "Buy *BF3* to get access to Battlelog". I immediately contacted EA's support and spoke with an advisor in a chat. This advisor informed me my account was temporarily banned for 72 hours.

I checked my email and, lo and behold, I had an email from EA, informing me my EA Online account was banned for using the word 'Badass' on the Battlelog forums. The context that the word was used in was myself calling Germany a "badass country". Apparently this really angered a mod for some reason and I was banned for 72 hours.
Roger

There's no need for that kind of language around here, sonny. Try 'nastybutt', 'meananus' or 'naughtybot' to avoid offending the weak of brain. Now go stand in a corner for 72 hours. We mean it! Begone!

We don't mean it.
PCG

THE HOT MAIL

Nowadays, I just click 'Download'

I've been thinking about Steam lately and how it changes the way I consume games. I feel that nowadays, rather then buy a game because I really want it, I would buy it due to a ridiculous Steam sale.

When I was a kid, no matter how much the game sucked, I still was so happy to play it! I took my time to play it, learn it, read the manual at school or in the car and talk about it to my friends. Nowadays, I just click 'Download', and if the game bores me I know it can be simply replaced.

Many games are byproducts of bundled games, and lie unplayed and untouched. I know that this is partly my own fault – and don't get me wrong, I love Steam – but do you think Steam has in a way changed the way we consume games?
William Ieong

You think you've got problems? Every day, every new release lands on our desks out of nowhere. Imagine the horror! Yet oddly, no matter how much we complain about being deluged with entertainment, nobody ever shows us any sympathy.

We know what you mean though. When you only have one game to last you, you make sure it does. When there's always another to distract you, even something as wonderful as* Skyrim *can get benched long before you've squeezed everything out of it. You know what we need? Gaming Ritalin. But not before* Mists of Pandaria *comes out, obviously.
PCG

The best missive we receive every issue will win its sender a shock-proof 32GB USB drive worth £70, courtesy of our lovely friends at Corsair. Find out about these gadgets at www.corsair.com. See above for how to get in touch with PC Gamer!

Somebody in a pit

Why do people insist on hating our inferior brethren, the console gamers? There is no need to hate them, you're contributing nothing to PC gaming and you're making the rest of us look like pricks. They may not have the money to buy a new computer or they may dislike the community. If they find playing on a console is better for them, then it's obviously better than any PC they could get. It's like laughing at somebody in a pit.

What is the objective in this pointless war between gaming systems? Why would you care if it doesn't even affect you anyway? Consoles may be pushing PC games off the shelf but we still have Steam's digital shelf and other digital distribution methods. I read Samuel Christie's letter about being insulted by OXM magazine being advertised... and also put on the shelves by Future Publishing? How naive must you be to think that a PC gamer couldn't possibly use a console. Correct me if I'm wrong but didn't some of the PCG staff write for consoles?

Bill Brind

Absolutely not! Any evidence to the contrary is purely the work of... uh... pod people. That's it.

Of course, most PC gamers don't hate console owners. (Pity them, maybe.) It's simply that when you've invested this much in your hobby/obsession, you want to be feel confident you've made the right choice. Anyone who says differently is therefore the Enemy. Luckily for us, they're also wrong. And smell.

PCG

Information in knots

Dear Sirs,

I wish all the writers for your magazine would try to keep humour out of all text – it just ties bits of information in knots. I want to know whether I should buy a game or not. From reading, I have some data that I have been stranded on an island populated by insane people. However, like Jack in *Far Cry*, I am probably an expert in all weapons. Please put a half page of game abbreviations, ie, FPS, DDR, etc, in each issue.

John MacGregor

"Please put half a page of game abbreviations in each issue"

Your po-faced request has been noted. Just for you, this response will feature no jokes whatsoever. Why did the chicken cross the road? He'd escaped from his cage and launched a futile bid for freedom before being recaptured and killed. How many space marines does it take to change a lightbulb? One. It's a very simple task. And finally: Three men walk into a bar. Each orders a drink and sits at a table chatting about the matters of the day until it closes. Later, one of them dies of liver poisoning. We hope this has helped.

PCG

He waxed lyrically

I have just read Graham Smith's review of *Battlefield 3*. I have been playing *Battlefield* since *BF1942* and have really enjoyed the series.

Having read the review I feel that Graham has not got the balance right. Firstly *BF3* IS multiplayer – the singleplayer campaign is a extremely minor part of the game. I personally consider it to be a freebie add-on that I may try when I get really bored. I have yet to play the singleplayer beyond the first minute! Graham has spent far too many column inches on the singleplayer, and probably based his end score too much weighted towards the singleplayer. I would suggest the review should be 99% based on the multiplayer and 1% on the singleplayer.

He waxed lyrically about how good the multiplayer game is and I agree with his comments – the first time I shot a helicopter out of the sky with my tank shell was sublime! The guns and equipment get better and better, now I have come to understand the upgrades the choices are virtually endless. The team play is the best that there is, bar none. Not to mention the graphics and Frostbite-powered destruction.

So my point is: 80%? Please. I have read your mag for a number of years and have purchased games on the basis of

TOP DRAW

What was last issue's amazing drawing? We'll keep you in suspense a while longer, while we introduce this month's hare-raising havoc from Ivan Causey, whose painting skills have won him a year's Zinio subscription to PC Gamer. Do you recognise it? Then write in and tell us, to win fame. But you'll only win a subscription if you send in your own picture and we use it.

And last issue's pic? *Saints Row: The Third*, of course.

Send your daubings to pcgamer@futurenet.com – the one we like the best wins a year's Zinio subscription to PC Gamer. No prizes for guessing the game, but the first to guess correctly gets their name in print.

SPK UR MND

I was curious if you guys were at all interested in *APB:Reloaded* being re-released. It's indeed a fun game, but there's a serious issue with it that I believe everyone should at least have a chance at knowing about.
J
Is it that it's still not very good? It would have been better to know that before sitting through that mammoth download. Again.

I am glad to know that you are in the marketing for Jurassic Park. We manufacture robotic dinosaurs, alive looking animals, entertainment, fibreglass skeletons, pirate models, models for children. If you are interested in, I will send you more details in our next email.
Jacky
We get the best spam. But we're not sure we're in the marketing for Jurassic Park. Would have given it more than 41% if so.

Have you fellas found the Alien Blaster in *Skyrim* yet? I'll tell you where it is for 2lbs of paper money.
John Freepalastine
Call us suspicious, but did you have some kind of ulterior motive when writing in?

Hi, my name is Marc. I thought I'd share my thoughts with you. It will probably get nowhere because it's long, but if someone reads this I guess I'd be happy to share my story. Just a ramble about my thoughts of gaming life over 15 years.
Marc Selby
Thanks for writing in, sir. We'd advise when doing so though, keep your letters short and punchy if you want to see them in print. 2,600 word missives are a teeny bit too long, even with ruthless editing. We'll give it a try though, in 5... 4... 3... 2..

Bugger!
Marc Selby
Indeed.

SEND

TXT UR REVIEW

Tweet your 140-character review to our Twitter account @PC_Gamer. Don't forget to include the game's name and a score.

Grim Fandango
Best game *ever made* in the history of ever. When the Residual emulator gets better, all can enjoy it.
98%
Joedaviso

The Old Republic
Plays like *WoW*, looks like *Mass Effect*, set in the Star Wars universe. Of course it's awesome!
85%
Lightspeed

The Binding of Isaac
Far more fun than it has right to be. A steal at any price.
85%
TheOneNallen

LA Noire
Nice faces, shame about everything else.
60%
Badbonobo

your reviews and on the whole I agree with most of your scores, but 80% is a joke! There are 11 other games in this month's mag with scores higher than 80%. Are you really suggesting that *Battlefield 3* is the 12th best game of the month?
Neil Mortimer

Sorry, but in this post-McGregor world, we don't do jokes around here. You should probably re-read the review though. Had* Battlefield *been a smoother experience, it would have scored better even with its bad singleplayer (and it's worth remembering that even if you don't play it, many people are going to). As it was, it had too many problems, dragging it down to the hellish abyss of 80%. The worst score ever!
PCG

No pun intended

Thank you sooooo much for the *SWTOR* key, I have always had a hard time to pay for games, but all I can say is WOW, no pun intended. I played Jedi Knight class in PvE – never a dull moment, the story keeps you very involved. Thanks again!
Justin Brooks

You're very welcome. Although we should point out that the PC Gamer Mint Imperials guild is firmly Sith aligned, so if we see you in-game, we will have to kill you with lightning and fire, you genetically inferior scum. (No offence.)
PCG

Passion and dissertation

I've been reading PC Gamer for a couple of years now, in fact it is the only thing that survived through the six months of game disillusion after I finished (in spectacular failure) with Games Design as a degree.

Instead of flattery about how much I love the magazine I'm going to get to the point: I would like to know if you take students for summer placements? I can send a CV, essays on games, and also the barrage of flattery and why I'd like to do a placement

Freeze! This is a hold-up!

"It's the only thing that survived the six months of game disillusion"

with you if you are willing to take on a student. I'm in the second year of a Literature degree, but games are my passion and dissertation topic for next year. (So I can write and nerd out all at once.)
Charlotte Broadhead

We do indeed take the occasional work experience placement. For information on how to apply, visit* jobs.futurenet.com. *(Your first initiative task is to find the Work Experience link. Your second is to work out Tim's favourite brand of sweeties.)
PCG

YOU'RE PLAYING

Julian Benson
Currently playing:
Bastion

Kid looks at his game. Kid sees it's good. And you know what? Kid is right.

Bastion is a game where everything feels spot-on, and the more I play of this isometric thwack-'em-up, the more of the game's complexities I can see. When it comes to combat, what the developer manages to do with a single attack button per weapon puts other games to shame. I'm able change my fighting style more in this wee game than I can with all the unlockable attachments in that hulking behemoth, *Call of Duty*.

Even though I've found my favoured machete/musket combo, I'm forever changing the power-ups I have active on my boomstick: sometimes sacrificing the crowd-controlling wide spread of pellets in favour of long range obliteration. Other times, I put all the power into a close range blast that turns my enemy's balls to shribbons.

Then there's the look of the thing: it stands out from so many games simply because it's so colourful. Whereas others feel the need to dim their palette to tell a dark story, the brightness of *Bastion* doesn't belie the plot one bit. Instead, the bright world, so recently un-peopled, gains in eeriness.

And it's a story told so well. Yes, it is effective to have a narrator tell us the lore of the land, but he wouldn't be half so good a device if it weren't for the strength of the writing. The developers have left so much out, nothing is overdone; if you were to make a game with the same mechanics, the same artwork, and the same actors, yet more lines of dialogue, it would be much the lesser for it.

Bastion isn't an important game, it hasn't created some new mechanic that will redefine the genre; but ten years from now its polish still won't have worn off.

crucial Tell us about the game you love, and why, in 300 words. Write to the usual place, and include your name and a photo. The best piece each month wins 2GB of Crucial Ballistix RAM carefully chosen for their PC by Crucial's experts – see *www.crucial.com/uk*.

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PC GAMER NETWORK

PLAY

JOIN OUR WORLD OF FRIENDLY FIRE

Good morning and welcome to the PC Gamer Community. Please keep your limbs inside the train at all times.

THE PC GAMER STEAM COMMUNITY POPULATION 46,143

Imagine over 46,143 new friends. Go on, imagine it. Now imagine that each of those new friends wants nothing more than to join you for a round of your favourite PC game. Now stop imagining it – because it's true! Simply sign up to our Steam community to instantly receive your new companions. No download necessary, and the only terms and conditions are 'good luck' and 'have fun'.

We run servers for the biggest and smallest multiplayer games, from *Battlefield 3* to *Minecraft*, while the ever-expanding dominion of our MMO presence stretches from *The Old Republic* to *EVE Online*. Make your way to *pcgamer.com/forum* to get started.

HOSTED BY MULTIPLAY

BATTLEFIELD 3

URL bit.ly/pcgbf3

We've been enjoying Back to Karkand. Join us for camaraderie, teamwork and various forms of airborne incompetence.

MINECRAFT

IP 83.222.240.186 **Port** 28265

Chip in with the latest projects on our *Minecraft* server. Help is at hand if you're planning to start your own extravaganza, too.

LEFT 4 DEAD 2

IP 85.236.100.18 **Port** 27615

Get separated and you'll be torn apart by hideous zombies. Can't think of a better post-Valentine's-Day sentiment.

TEAM FORTRESS 2

IP 85.236.100.18 **Port** 27115

Don't look now, but there's a spy behind you. Jump onto our *TF2* server to let him know you're on to him.

HOW TO JOIN THE STEAM COMMUNITY

STEP 1
If you don't already have a Steam account, head to *www.steampowered.com*, download the client, run it and sign up.

STEP 2
Install your games from the Steam client. If you're having technical problems, hit the forums at the Steam site.

STEP 3
In the community tab of the Steam client, search for PC Gamer and join our group. Then chat, play and troll to your heart's content.

FEB

29

Leap to lightspeed
It's a leap year, so Feb 29 isn't a real day. That means we can stay at home and play *SW:TOR* in our pants.

MAR

02

***Ridge Racer Unbounded* released**
Arrange races, share best times and show off your custom tracks on our forum at *pcgamer.com/forum*.

09

***Mass Effect 3* released**
Bring the fight to the Reapers in four player co-op, or seal yourself away to experience Shepard's final chapter in perfect isolation.

14

PCG 238 released. Party!
Pick up the latest issue on the eve of the ides of March. Strap several copies to your body to discourage would-be assassins.

PLAYER OF THE MONTH

Who? Visigoth
Where? *Star Wars: The Old Republic*
Why? Set up the alt character guild when the regular one burst its banks.

Miracle on Minecraft

The winners of our server Christmas build competition

Admin frainbog decided to give the hundreds of people who call our *Minecraft* server their blocky home a little Christmas miracle at the end of 2011, by organising a build competition.

There were prizes for the three best builds in each category: builds by 14-year-olds and under, 15-and-overs, and a special category for those on the server tagged as 'creative' constructors. Rich had the pleasure of judging the final category, which included a fully interactive 25-day advent calendar with 60-foot-tall Santa, a nativity scene that stretched further than the game could render even with graphics settings at maximum, and a replica of the village from Christmas movie The Grinch.

WON £100S OF GAMES

Our thanks to frainbog and the other admins for setting up the event. The prizes included hundreds of pounds worth of Steam games, as well as full-size statues of the winners' *Minecraft* characters to commemorate their success.

If you'd like to join the seemingly boundless maelstrom of creativity, hop on our *Minecraft* server. See the opposite page for details.

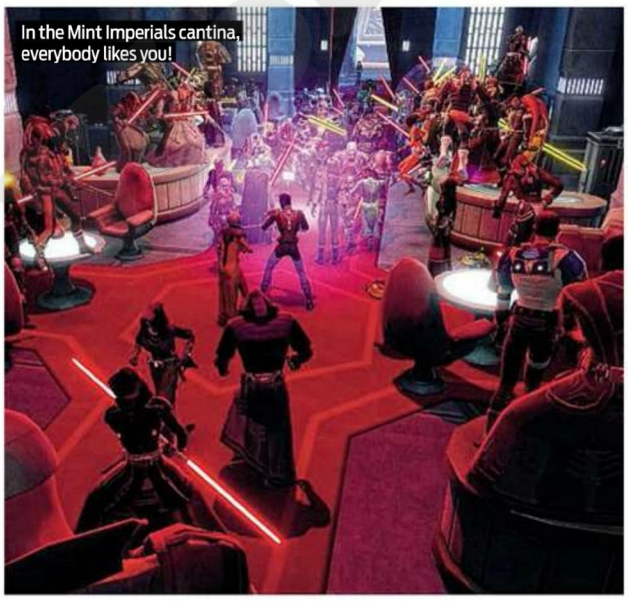
ADVENTURES IN THE OLD REPUBLIC

Our *Old Republic* guild – the PC Gamer Mint Imperials – was huge before the game even launched. Thanks to BioWare's decision to trickle players into the game pre-release, we'd managed to secure a healthy grip on the Nightmare Lands server before the official start date on December 20. It was only fitting that we organised a show of force for other, lesser guilds.

We arranged to meet on the steps of the Korriban Sith temple at 10pm on launch day. After some remarkably organised posing, where our guild members arranged themselves in lines in class order, things got a little stranger. And a little more naked. One by one, Mint Imperials started to remove their clothes, leaving a hodgepodge of improbably muscled alien flesh blocking the steps to one of the galaxy's most solemn places.

The decision was made to move the party to the Sith cantina. It's normally a quiet place, entered only occasionally during the game's first few hours to receive a quest. We packed it out with a hundred players all /dancing, /drinking, and firing off their most colourful abilities.

Korriban was chosen as an easy to reach destination for both high- and low-level players, but its status as a starter planet for half of the Imperial classes had a secondary benefit: we managed to utterly baffle – and likely scar for life – a good percentage of the server's new players. If you'd like to help us confuse the unenlightened, make yourself a character on the Nightmare Lands server, and see *bit.ly/pcgmintimps* for an officer to whisper. Complete a short PC Gamer-reading test, and they'll get you in.


In the Mint Imperials cantina, everybody likes you!

It's not all dancing: we're always running flashpoints.

For a scary Sith warrior, Darth Malgus is pretty hands-off.

NOW PLAYING

StarCraft II
Forum: bit.ly/o1J4gg
Our *StarCraft II* community has now arranged four tournaments, with hopefully many more to come. If the idea of pitching yourself against PC Gamer's finest seems too daunting, hop on the forums to download some replays: not only will you improve your own game, but you just might learn the secrets of someone you'll one day face yourself. Our Battle.net channel is called 'PC Gamer' – be sure to hop on for a quick 4v4 or just to hang out.

World of Warcraft
Server: PCG
Guild name: Steamwheedle Cartel
Forum: bit.ly/pcgwowguild
Things have been quiet in *WoW* of late, with players splitting their time between Azeroth and the galaxy far, far away. We've still got a strong raiding presence, however, and new players are always more than welcome to join – whether you're at the top of your game or still finding your way. Last month our mage Zalid managed to replace a boss's portal with his own, transporting half the group back to Orgrimmar mid-raid. For these and other hi-jinks, check out the PCG forum.

EVE Online
Server: PCG
Guild name: PCG Enterprises
Forum: bit.ly/pcgeve
Now is a good time to be getting into *EVE Online*, with the release of the well-received Crucible expansion and the continued growth of our corporation, PCG Enterprises. The corp recently held a frigate tournament, where players kitted out low-level ships and hunted each other across vast swathes of space for fun and prizes. The gang are big on sharing kit and helping out new players, so if you're intimidated by *EVE*'s depth – and frankly, who isn't – this is a good place to start.

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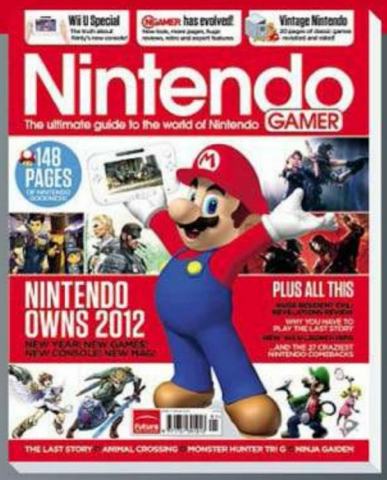
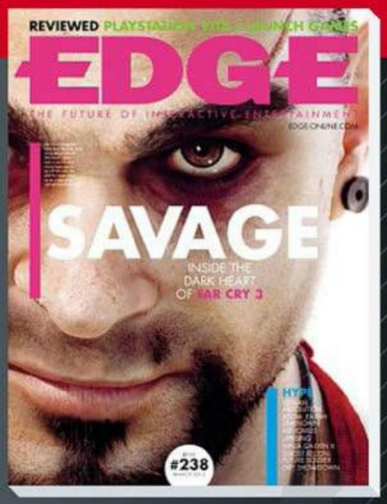




WIN!

The winner of PCG 234's 'Big Chopper' competition

The dream of flight is as old as man, but it's something that has long evaded the PC Gamer staff. None of us, for some reason, are able to fly. We've tried flapping, spinning, and thinking very hard about what it might be like to be a plane, but to no avail. That's why in PCG 234 we turned matters over to you.

Make us something that flies, we said, in honour of Bohemia Interactive's copter-centric flight sim *Take on Helicopters*.

Lyn Burtenshaw's festive contraption (PCG 234 was the Christmas issue) substituted Santa's reindeer for a pair of motorised, lightweight helicopter blades attached to a cardboard sleigh.

It was a device so light it was capable of actual flight – and that was when terror struck. On activation, the Santacopter made a disconcertingly swift and unerring beeline for Chris's face, its blades whirling. On every subsequent attempt to demonstrate the model, it did the same thing.

One attempt on a man's face may be considered bad luck; two is suspicious; three is an assassination attempt. Whether or not the device was simply trying to shave him, as some theorised, Chris and the copter have now been separated for their mutual protection.

Thank goodness, then, that Richard Cockbill's entry was here to calm us down. He sent us an adorable balsawood *Minecraft* pig, which, when attached to the ceiling, flew in gentle concentric circles with the aid of a little tail-propeller. Entire moments were lost to mesmerised silence as we watched the excellently-named Hamelia Earhart fly her course. Owen is still happily watching her, actually, which is weird because we've taken her down. For his woodworking skill, puncraft, and for restoring the part of Chris' inner child lost since he discovered that Santa was trying to kill him, Richard wins the PC.

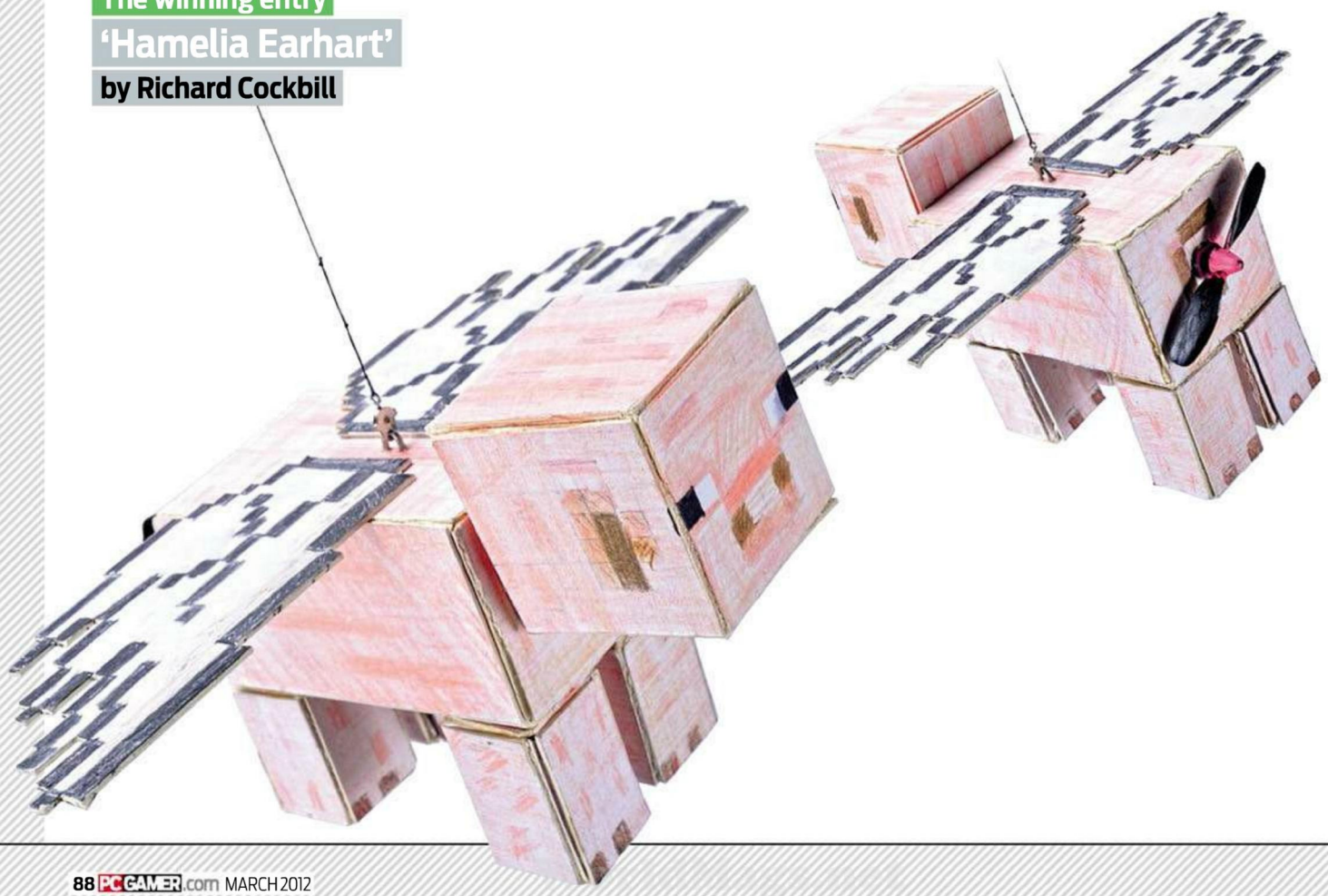
WHAT RICHARD WON:

- Gigabyte GA-Z68A-D3 motherboard
- 2x 2GB DDR3 1333MHz Kingston RAM
- HDD 1TB F3
- 24X DVD+-RW
- FC NZXT Sentry fan control
- VGA GTX 560 1GB graphics card
- CoolerMaster HAF 912 Case
- Asetek water cooling
- PSU Cyberpower 800W
- Intel Core i7 CPU 2600K overclocked to 4.5GHZ

The winning entry

'Hamelia Earhart'

by Richard Cockbill



Now win this...

A PC fit for a king

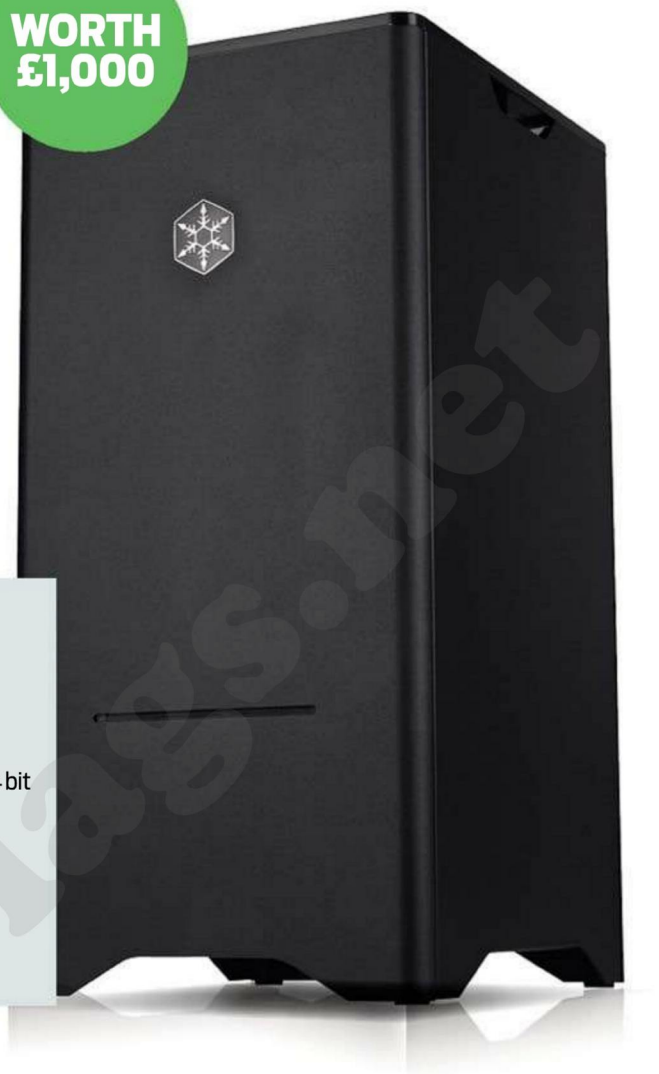
You've always got room in your life for another astoundingly huge fantasy RPG – but you might not have the PC for it. We're here to help. This month we're giving away a grand's worth of PC in honour of *Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning*, a giganto-RPG of questing and monster-bashing, wrapped up in a surprisingly colourful setting and a cheerfully responsive control system.

It's designed by *Morrowind* and *Oblivion* lead designer Ken Rolston, and underpinned by a script from widely-regarded fantasy/sci-fi author R A Salvatore *[The man who dropped a moon on Chewbacca's head* – Star Wars Ed].

The world of Amalur itself is close enough to traditional fantasy environs to feel welcoming, but it's got its own tinge: the imaginative enemy design, in particular, gives the world a serious sense of place. And you've got a wide range of ways to get rid of those enemies: the game's three classes – mage, warrior and rogue – can each play with a variety of weapons. Take a staff as a mage, and you'll be able to launch classic firebolts from far away. But you could also grab a set of chakrams – those metal discs Xena used to chuck – and get a little blood on your wizardly robes.

To be in with a chance of winning a PC that'll render *Reckoning* in all its glory, all you need to do is make us king. See below for details.

WORTH £1,000



THE PRIZE

- LAN Party Evo Commander
- Silverstone Fortress FT03B
- Intel Core i5 2500K
- GTX 560Ti 1GB
- MS Windows 7 Home Premium 64 bit
- 8GB 1600MHZ RAM
- Asus Maximus IV Gene-z
- 800W PSU
- 2TB SATA II HDD
- 32GB SSD in SRT Mode
- DVDRW

HOW TO WIN

King for a day

We want you to design us a crown, so that here at PC Gamer we can all be kings of our very own kingdoms. Design, draw or make us some form of regal adornment that can sit atop our skulls and make our neighbours fall to their knees in worship. If it looks too icky, we're not putting it on our heads.

COMPETITION RULES By taking part in a Competition, you agree to be bound by the Competition Rules which are summarised below but can be viewed in full at www.futurenet.com/futureonline/competitionrules.asp. Late or incomplete entries will be disqualified. Proof of posting (if relevant) shall not be deemed proof of delivery. Entries must be submitted by an individual (not via any agency or similar) and, unless otherwise stated, are limited to one per household. The Company reserves the right in its sole discretion to substitute any prize with cash or a prize of comparable value. Unless otherwise stated, the Competition is open to all GB residents of 18 years and over, except employees of Future Publishing and any party involved in the competition or their households. By entering a Competition you give permission to use your name, likeness and personal information in connection with the Competition and for promotional purposes. All entries will become the property of the Company upon receipt and will not be returned. You warrant that the Competition entry is entirely your own work and not copied or adapted from any other source. If you are a winner, you may have to provide additional information. Details of winners will be available on request within three months of the closing date. If you are a winner, receipt by you of any prize is conditional upon you complying with (amongst other things) the Competition Rules. You acknowledge and agree that neither the Company nor any associated third parties shall have any liability to you in connection with your use and/or possession of your prize.

PRIZE DRAW RULES By taking part in a Prize Draw, you agree to be bound by the Prize Draw Rules which are summarised below but can be viewed in full at survey.futurenet.com/prizedrawtandcs2007. Late or incomplete entries will be disqualified. Proof of posting (if relevant) shall not be deemed proof of delivery. Entries must be submitted by an individual (not via any agency or similar) and, unless otherwise stated, are limited to one per household. The winner(s) will be selected at random after the specified closing date. Winner(s) will be notified by email or telephone within 28 days of the closing date. The Company reserves the right in its sole discretion to substitute any prize with cash or a prize of comparable value. Unless otherwise stated, the Prize Draw is open to all GB residents of 16 years and over, except employees of Future Publishing and any party involved in the competition or their households. By entering a Prize Draw you give permission to use your name, likeness and personal information in connection with the Prize Draw and for promotional purposes. If you are a winner, you may have to provide additional information. Details of winners will be available on request within three months of the closing date. If you are a winner, receipt by you of any prize is conditional upon you complying with (amongst other things) the Prize Draw Rules. You acknowledge and agree that neither the Company nor any associated third parties shall have any liability to you in connection with your use and/or possession of your prize.

Name

Address

Postcode

Email

Phone Number

Send your competition entry and this form to: 'The King's geeks' competition, PC Gamer, 30 Monmouth St, Bath BA1 2BW. The closing date for this competition is March 14, 2012.

Your contact details from this entry form will only be used for contacting you if you are a winner. For terms and conditions applying to PC Gamer competitions, point your eyes at the small print leftwards.

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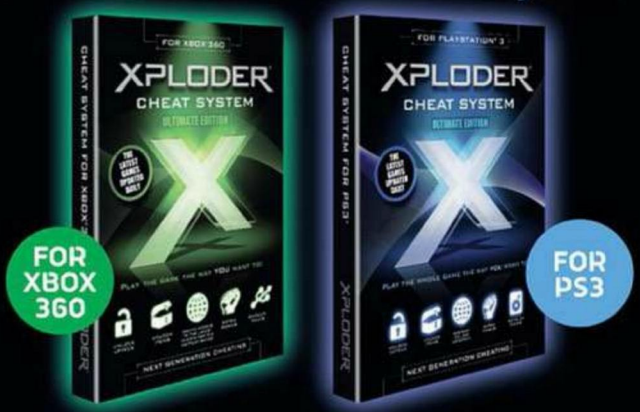

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REVIEWS

How we review

Wherever possible, we finish every game before finalising the review. We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of the reviews section is to help you make buying decisions. As such, we'll review paid-for content of all types in addition to the latest big-name releases.

Our scoring system explained

0-30% Intolerable
A crime against gaming. Whether it's bugs or bad design, this should be shot on sight.

31-45% Weak
Serious flaws ruin any chance this game has of offering sustained fun.

46-60% Mediocre
A very ordinary game, quickly forgotten. Think twice even if you find it cheap.

61-75% Fair
A decent effort that, but for a little more polish, coulda been a contender.

76-89% Good
Enjoyable, well-made and entertaining – just falling short of true greatness.

90%+ Editor's Choice
Oozing class, this is the work of experts at the top of their game. Bravo, sirs!

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

A game scoring 90% or more is the proud recipient of a PC Gamer Editor's Choice award. The Editor's personal seal of approval means we think the recipient is a truly great example of its genre.

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We aim to review games at their best, and this means playing them on our two Cyberpower PCs. The Gamer Infinity i7 Pro boasts a Core i7 920 CPU, 3GB DDR3 RAM and a GTS250 graphics card. Coming from the AMD angle, our watercooled Gamer Ultra Perseus machine has a Phenom II CPU, 4GB DDR3 RAM and an HD 4870 card. Powerful machines both, but we also test new games on lower-spec machines, and we'll tell you if a game will make unreasonable demands. Go to *www.cyberpowersystem.co.uk* for more info on our top-spec machines.

CYBERPOWER

Love me tendril

Which is more important to the progression of games as an artform: a lonely exploration game that examines grief and isolation through a disjointed narrative, or having four arms? Before you answer, bear in mind that two of those arms are extensible tentacles that you can insert into your enemies to disembowel them.

This month is one of the most vigorously mixed bags in memory. The *Darkness 2*'s crass, repulsive, satisfying ultraviolence couldn't have less to do with the quiet beauty of mod-made-good *Dear Esther*. Both are great games in their own way. And between the crumpled wreck of *Flatout 3* and the miserably unfunny *Postal 3*, it's a great month for kickings too.

RICHARD MCCORMICK
NEWS EDITOR
Richard.McCormick@futurenet.com

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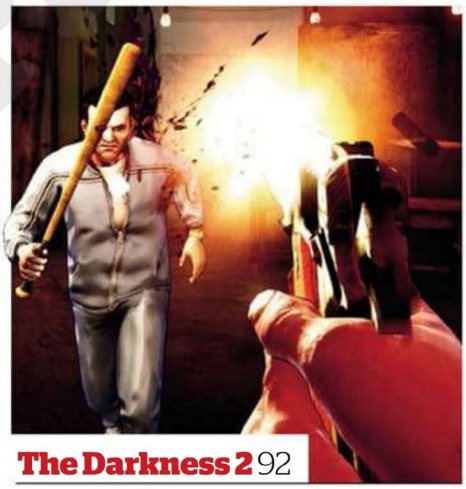

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Need to know

What is it?
A violent shooter set in a comic book world where you wield weapon and tentacles.

Influenced by
Condemned: Criminal Origins

Play it on
Dual core CPU, Geforce 460, 4GB RAM

Alternatively
Bulletstorm, 80%

"Your most dignified move is called 'torso smash'"

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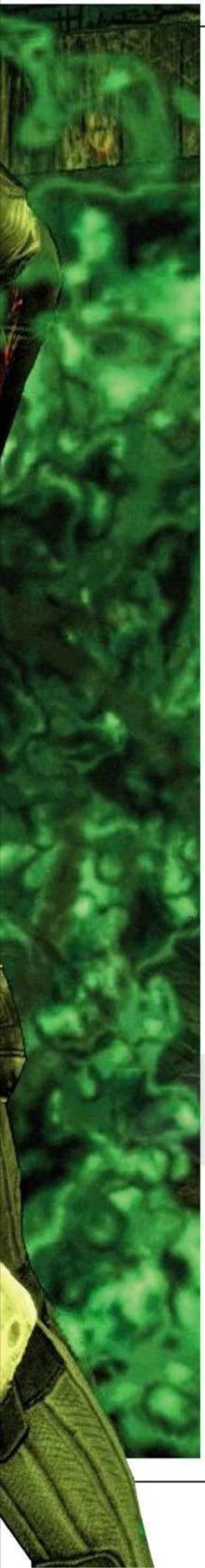

UNAFRAID

There's something unexpected waiting for you in **THE DARKNESS II**. *By Rich McCormick*

Four arms: it was so obvious. It must be galling for other shooter developers. They've spent decades since *Doom* trying to work out ways to innovate on the FPS model, to make shooting people feel fresh and interesting again. They've tried vast open worlds and they've tried hurling Hollywood-size production values at projects, but the *Darkness II* manages it by just giving anti-hero Jackie Estacado four arms.

Well. *Technically* he only has two arms. These are his normal limbs, functioning as arms do in games where arms are only necessary to hold guns and occasionally fire them at swarms of enemies. He also has two demonic snake-tentacles.

In the last *Darkness* game – an under-reported and enjoyable shooter sadly not released on PC – Jackie Estacado became the host for the titular 'Darkness', an eternally chaotic non-corporeal beastie that gladly took up residence in the young mobster's brainpan. The Darkness, it's understood, is about as old as humanity itself, every so often choosing a new host with just the right balance of psychotic amorality and poignant backstory.

In game terms, it means Jackie grows two pitch-black snakes out of his shoulders that can be employed in firefights to munch on the vital organs of his enemies.

Arms and the man

At first, the four arms feel cumbersome. Jackie can already dual-wield all but the bulkiest shotguns and assault rifles, and *The Darkness II*'s guns by themselves make for a satisfying shooter. Even the weediest pistol has a powerful kick, and they're almost comedically accurate over distance, lending Jackie a sense of overwhelming power that is consistently fun to direct toward your foes. But couple that with the option to whip the Darkness's serpentine limbs into scuffles, and it seems too much to fit around one WASD-ing hand.

But a few murders in, and I was surprised at just how quickly I'd managed to process the additional moves the limb graft gave me. Simplest of these is the Darkness's ability to eat the hearts of fallen opponents, available with a tap of the R key. The leftmost snake-tentacle – the busier of the two throughout the game – whips forward and buries its improbably huge teeth in the chests of mutilated enemies. Scarfing down such man-offal gives Jackie a health boost, making the decision to chow down on a mid-fight snack tactical. At first, I'd eat my foe's heart the second he slumped to the ground; later, as fights got tougher, I saved them, only launching my monstrosity chestwards when I was close to death.

"Dangling enemies can be eviscerated in a number of fascinating ways"

Heart-eating might be the Darkness's simplest move, but impressively, it's not the ickiest. Jackie also has a variety of execution moves he's able to perform on staggered enemies. Throw a target off balance with a withering enough attack and they'll stumble forward, their hearts and circulatory system picked out through their skin in shining white. Tap E and your tentacle friend will grab them, dangling them just in Jackie's eyeshot, from where they can be eviscerated in a number of fascinatingly gruesome ways.

To get a flavour of just how depraved some of these executions are, the most dignified is called 'torso smash' and has your inky-black snake pal slam your chosen target so hard into the ground that his ribcage ruptures. At the other end of the taste spectrum is the sickening move that has the Darkness upend an enemy and delve into their rectum, before pulling their entire spine – skull attached – out of the expanded hole.

Jackie's demon-arms can also be ▸

All in the execution

Jackie's finishing moves bring handy side-effects

HEALTH
Regains Jackie a small amount of lifeforce, often by tipping a person upside down and pulling them apart by the legs.

AMMO
Somehow gives Jackie ammo for his conventional weapons, by disembowelling foes. They keep ammo in their spleens?

POWER
Hastens the recharge of Jackie's special abilities 'swarm' and 'gun channelling', which let him tie up or kill enemies with no ammo.

SHIELD
Grants Jackie a shield made of solid darkness. Apparently it was inside that poor guy's colon all along. Along with his ammo.

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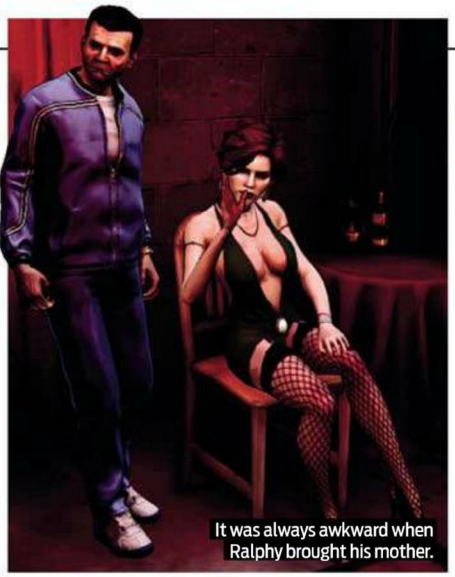

It was always awkward when Ralphy brought his mother.

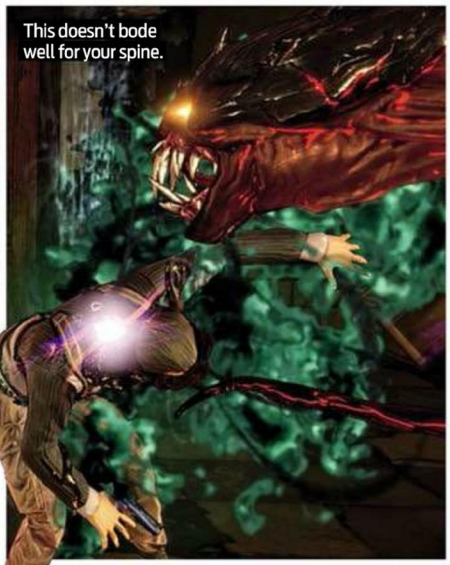
The graphics style riffs on the game's comic book origins.

"Wait, wait, we can resolve this amicably if we just- *aaaaaahh!*"

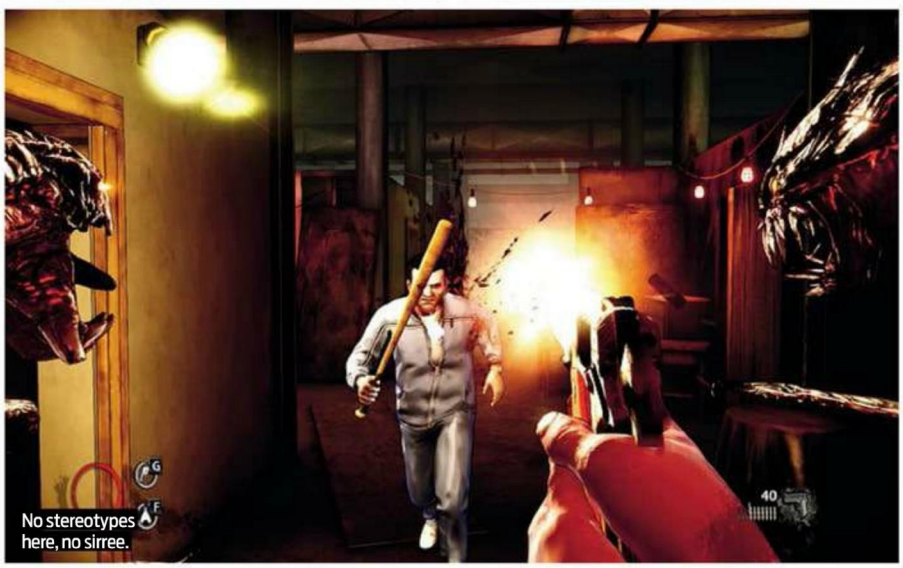
'Dark blast' makes even chairs explode when you throw them.

"This is not the kind of scrap I had in mind at all!"

Fight on, even when your glasses get steamed up.


This doesn't bode well for your spine.

'Take you apart' is no longer a figure of speech.


No stereotypes here, no sirree.

"Special delivery of tentacle for Mr Aiiieeee."

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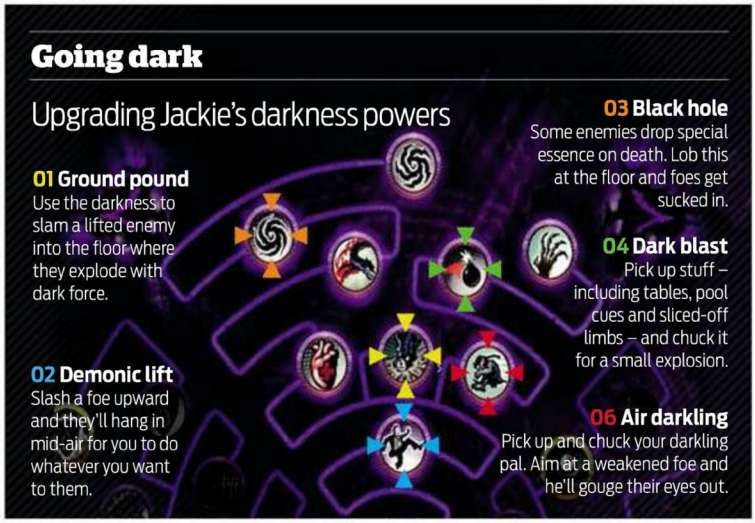
Going dark

Upgrading Jackie's darkness powers



01 Ground pound
Use the darkness to slam a lifted enemy into the floor where they explode with dark force.

02 Demonic lift
Slash a foe upward and they'll hang in mid-air for you to do whatever you want to them.

03 Black hole
Some enemies drop special essence on death. Lob this at the floor and foes get sucked in.

04 Dark blast
Pick up stuff – including tables, pool cues and sliced-off limbs – and chuck it for a small explosion.

06 Air darkling
Pick up and chuck your darkling pal. Aim at a weakened foe and he'll gouge their eyes out.

employed as impromptu whips: holding the middle-mouse button and slashing sends a high-speed swipe across the screen. I used this skill least, however: it's useful to clear a glut of foes crowded in front of you, but the default control method makes it a touch fiddly.

The Darkness makes Jackie superhuman, but it's not a 'win-all' button. Jackie can only employ the Darkness, fittingly, when he's in the dark. Lights banish the snakes from his shoulders with a shudder and a hiss. So too does Jackie's 'darkling' disappear, a three-foot goblin-like sidekick that somehow manages to stay endearing despite cracking wise for the length of the game and urinating on enemy corpses.

The lighting problem necessitates a systematic elimination of illumination: lightbulbs are the first thing to go after I enter a room. With the room submerged in gloom, I am free to rampage effectively, Jackie's full range of abilities at your finger and tentacle tips. Some later lights are invulnerable to gunfire, forcing you to find their power supply. Later again, enemies start to carry portable arclamps, cutting off parts of the battlefield with sweeping beams of horrible brightness and making a chap consider his surroundings carefully before launching assaults.

A successful series of kills rewards Jackie with essence – a wooshy purple substance that can be traded for extra powers. Some of these powers are functional, providing additional ammunition or shortening reload times; others are ridiculous. My favourite gave me the chance to hurl my darkling at chosen foes. I'd grab him before a fight, letting him hang off to the side of the screen in swimming pool 'cannonball' pose, before launching him forward, his tiny claws raking and scraping at enemy eyes.

The hyper-violence of *The Darkness II* is comic in the extreme – in both senses of the word. The game is based on the comic books of the same name, and its characters are, as befitting the title, black and white in morality.

Carrot, topped

After his escapades in the previous game – neatly summed up by an optional 'previously on *The Darkness*' cutscene – Jackie starts *The Darkness II* as the head of a mafia family, under attack from sources that want his power. He's obviously a violent man, having killed his first victim, according to cinematics, at 16, but he's given salvation through his relationship with girlfriend Jenny. One small problem: she was killed by a rival mob boss in the previous game. Without her physical presence, Jackie's moral checks are loosened, but even so the game is careful to steer him so the people in his way are unquestionably more disgusting and evil than he is. Jenny's death serves as a girlfriend-shaped carrot on a stick, driving Jackie forward.

The Darkness II's enemies are so unquestionably nefarious that I rarely had time to stop and question the linearity of the levels. Your main antagonist has a hunchback, a limp, and a burned-up face, for God's sake: if he's not comic book evil, I don't know what is.

On the friendlier side, Jackie has a supporting cast of mobsters to help in his quest for vengeance. Between missions, you're sent back to the Estacado homestead, a plush apartment in central New York. These sections serve to add character to the gang Jackie is acting head of, but they could do with being a touch more interactive: after trudging around the grounds I was rewarded with one bottle-shooting minigame and a few incidental conversations.

That story can't keep up the pace forever. The final levels are a slog where their predecessors were a sprint, and the procession of maniacally grisly deaths eventually dulls the shock receptors. But developers Digital Extremes have orchestrated some careful pacing: the plot's headlong rush – 'chase them, find him, kill others' – has occasional moments of uneasy calm so interesting I won't spoil them. These moments of clear air serve to highlight the ferocity of Jackie's cleaving path, putting him in situations he can't shoot, slash or chew his way out of.

There are acceptable outs for players wholly unengaged with the story – cutscenes and dialogue can be skipped – but the plot remains involving in a way rarely seen in shooters. Again, I'm dancing around my words to avoid giant spoilers, but *The Darkness II* plays with concepts of unreliable narration in a way that only games allow. It makes you question the veracity of the story you've just played.

Also, it lets you pull peoples' guts out of their bum with giant demonsnake arms. *The Darkness II* is a dumb shooter that's three times as clever as it looks. So too is Jackie's murderous repertoire three times as extensive as that of other shooters. It might not last long and the action doesn't alter its tone, but *The Darkness II*'s charms stuck with me long after I turned out the light. ■

"Lightbulbs are the first thing to go when I enter a room"

VERDICT

A dark, violent comic book given light and heart. A ripping yarn that tears along as fast as you can tear through bodies.

PC GAMER **80**

◆ **Expect to pay** £28 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** 2K Games ◆ **Developer** Digital Extremes
◆ **Multiplayer** 4 player co-op ◆ **Link** embracethedarkness.com

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SINCERELY

Go searching for meaning in **DEAR ESTHER**, on the most existential island in the Hebrides. ***By Chris Thursten***

Need to know

What is it?
First-person tragi-fiction, and the remake of a well-regarded *Half-Life 2* mod.

Influenced by
Loneliness, loss, despair

Play it on
Dual Core CPU, GeForce 8800, 4GB RAM

Alternatively
Amnesia: The Dark Descent, 88%

Copy protection
Steam

You wander the cliffs, caves and sheep-pens of a windswept Hebridean island. A single voice reads out fragments of letters, and through these you gain snatches of information about the island and other people who took a walk similar to yours.

Their stories bleed into each other: the travel writer who visited the island in pursuit of a legendary hermit. The shepherd stranded here without friends or family, whose situation reflects the hermit's. *Dear Esther* is about heavy subjects: isolation and tragedy tie the island's visitors together.

It began life as a *Half-Life 2* mod that preferred story to shooting. It was a slow-paced *experience* more than a game, praised for the way it adapted first-person exploration to tell a complex tale of grief, illness and loss. Its hour-long playing time and experimental ambitions were a natural fit for a mod, but it remains mesmerising as a paid-for title.

The island contains clues both material – an abandoned home, a shipwreck – and abstract, in the form of markings that adorn the walls of cliffs and luminous caves. To the game's credit, there's no Lost-style magic answer lurking in a hole somewhere: what you're exploring are the emotional consequences of a tragedy that happened in modern-day Britain, played out against a mysterious but grounded backdrop. The only thing you shoot is thoughtful looks at your monitor.

Telling stories

The order in which you receive the narrative is switched around every time you play, certain locations serving as focal points. The game always starts with a letter to the Esther of the title, but the next chunk of spoken text varies, and the game spits out different soliloquies as you meander between the island's sequential areas. *Dear Esther* doesn't ask for much physical input, but the story it has to tell wouldn't work in any other medium: while the basic facts don't change, randomisation can substantially change the emphasis. Connect the strands of information, invest yourself in the sketched plot, and your brain will fill-in the rest as the island takes on an ethereal reality.

Dear Esther never asks you to solve a puzzle to progress, and it's better for it. You can stop to look at a circuit diagram that's been scrawled onto a cave wall, take a few minutes to untangle its cryptic meaning – but there's no powered-down door that requires you to do so.

As a game, it will draw criticism from those uninterested in narrative for not challenging the player: for all the evocative atmosphere, it's still an hour of wandering around and listening to a man speak. But the lack of puzzles is necessary: it's crucial to the experience that you're allowed to keep moving at your own pace. With puzzles, it would just be a slightly more depressing *Myst*. Without puzzles, the visuals and narrative are allowed to take precedence.

Dear Esther's atmosphere is the core of the game – it's *all* of the game – and that's a direct result of the haunting level design. Here, something as mundane as a lonely cottage on a hillside can end up lodged deeper in your gaming memory than the dragons and spaceships of countless other games. The script also deserves praise. It charts a course through vastly different topics you never realised you cared about before – folklore, the Bible, shepherding, travel writing, guilt and medicine – and turns them into something meaningful without speaking down to its audience.

Dear Esther provokes thought and feeling in a way few other games do. Stripped down to its constituent parts, there's very little *game* here at all. But at the same time, it's a story that only games give us the freedom to hear. ■

No going back

Esther's environmental art has left the mod far behind

The jetty
This is where it all begins. The remake pushes the draw distance back to hint at crucial locations to come.

Debris
The wreckage on the shoreline is not only more substantial, but now includes a few extra secrets.

Caves
Brighter and more colourful, the island's caves have lost none of their mystery and menace.

"All you'll shoot is thoughtful looks at your monitor"

◆ **Expect to pay** £6.99 ◆ **Release** February ◆ **Publisher** thechineseroom ◆ **Developer** thechineseroom with Robert Briscoe ◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** dear-esther.com

VERDICT

A trip through a brilliantly conceived landscape that rewards attentive engagement with a moving story.

PC GAMER **84**

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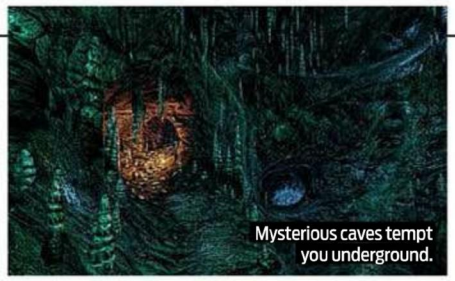
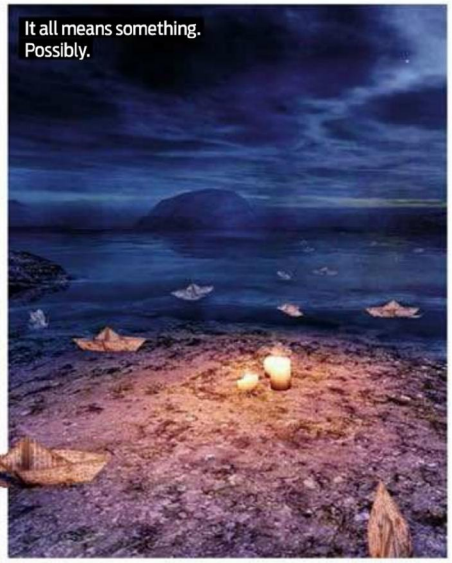


Mysterious caves tempt you underground.

Long-gone shepherds have left a few signs of humanity.

Despite the linear environments, it's surprisingly easy to get lost.



It all means something. Possibly.

Dear Esther begins at dusk, and ends when the sun has set.

The place is a spelunker's paradise, frankly.

Breathtaking reveals are everywhere.

Each detail is a part of the whole.

If only you could talk to the... Oh. There aren't any.

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INSECTICIDE

Games don't come any more bug-ridden than **EARTH DEFENCE FORCE: INSECT ARMAGEDDON**. *By Tom Senior*

Need to know

What is it?
Third-person arcade shooter vs giant swarming insects and giant robots.

Influenced by
Doom, B-movies

Play it on
2GHz dual core CPU, 1GB RAM, 512MB 3D card

Alternatively
Serious Sam: BFE, 70%

Copy protection
Steam

According to B-movies, our planet's demise will be caused by one of two things: giant insects, or giant robots. *Earth Defence Force* asks an important question: what would happen if giant insects somehow teamed up with giant robots?

The answer, apparently, is that the world authorities would drop a team of marines into the midst of an infested city, equip them with the most advanced weaponry available, and then hire a woman with a longwave radio to tell them to go from street to street and eradicate the hideous menace.

In *EDF* you save humanity across 15 fairly short levels. Each one drops you into a walled-off section of city a few blocks wide and throws hundreds of enemies your way.

Earth Defence Force has plenty in common with the B-movies that inspired it. The boxy city blocks and low-poly monsters provide a dated, low budget backdrop to the straightforward, repetitive action. You'll mostly be blowing up anthills – giant anthills, naturally – holding points against enemy waves and, in the game's most honest moments, simply wandering through the streets clearing out every giant ant, spider, wasp and robot you find in the place. Your foes attack by fielding a variety of units assembled in huge numbers, so that battles tend to hit an intense sweet spot in which you'll find yourself on the verge of being completely overwhelmed. It's exhausting, but fun.

Electric

You play Lightning Alpha, leader of Strike Force Lightning. They're a bit like Revels: they come in multiple flavours and some are a bit rubbish. There's awesome jetpack man with his experimental electric shotguns, decent but boring assault man with access to a wide range of weaponry, sluggish heavy weapons man and annoying support man with an automated deployable turret and a rich, chocolaty centre.

You can take on each level with a couple of friends, or let the reasonably competent AI take their place. As you kill enemies, you'll level up and unlock more weapons. Levels can be replayed to earn improved scores and unlock more guns, but only obsessive high-score hunters are likely to keep coming back. As gratuitous and satisfying as *EDF*'s fights are, it doesn't take long for the magic to wear off.

In its finest moments, *EDF* assaults you from all angles. Buildings crumble to reveal a nest of giant leaping spiders, each the size of a couple of London buses. Acid-spitting ants swarm over buildings to get near you. Ticks the size of dogs try to latch onto you and suck you dry, and all the while robotic warships buzz overhead, pausing every now and then to target you with a laser. There are occasional enormo-bosses too, somewhat inevitably. For all the chaos, *EDF* can't help but be predictable.

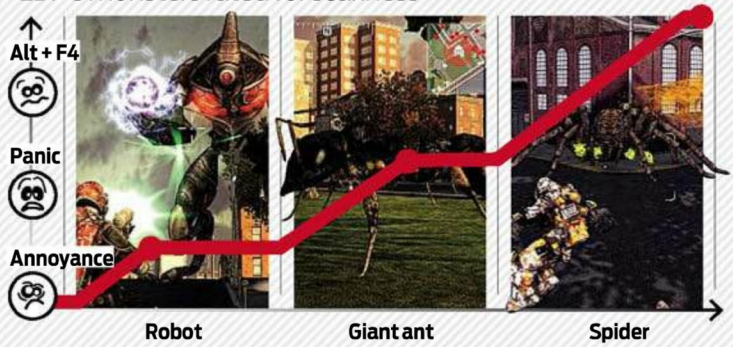
The ageing visuals can't quite deliver on the promise of that 'Insect Armageddon' tagline, either. It's impossible not to become desensitised to the spectacle after a few hours. After that, *EDF* gradually loses momentum. Its extensive armoury can't stop the rot, and the end result is decidedly shallow. The weapons of each class are effective against different bugs, but taking down the hordes always boils down to strafing, back-pedalling and holding down the fire button.

The budget price reflects *EDF*'s shortfalls and makes it a little easier to recommend. On a higher difficulty, played in co-op with friends, eradicating the swarms is good, straightforward fun, for a few hours at least. But if you're in any way arachnophobic, avoid this like a plague of flesh-eating spiders.■

"In its finest moments, *EDF* assaults you from all angles"

Fear factor

EDF's monsters rated for scariness



◆ **Expect to pay** £15 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** D3 Publisher of America Inc ◆ **Developer** In-house ◆ **Multiplayer** Up to three, co-op ◆ **Link** www.edfia.com

VERDICT

A frenetic, old fashioned monster blaster best played with friends. Creepy-crawlyphobes, look elsewhere.

PC GAMER **60**

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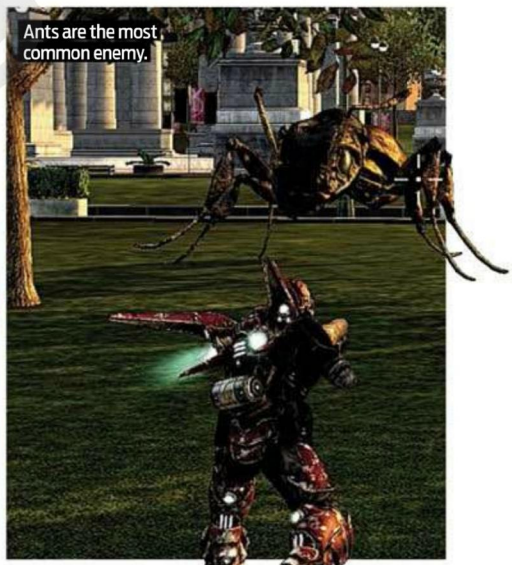
We're going to need a bigger can of bug spray.

Jetpack guy is the fastest and most fun class.

The EDF's VTOLs never stick around to help.

You should have aimed at where I was going to be!


Ants are the most common enemy.

Occasional turret bits provide variety.

You need rockets to take down motherships.

Enemies get bigger and bigger with every level.

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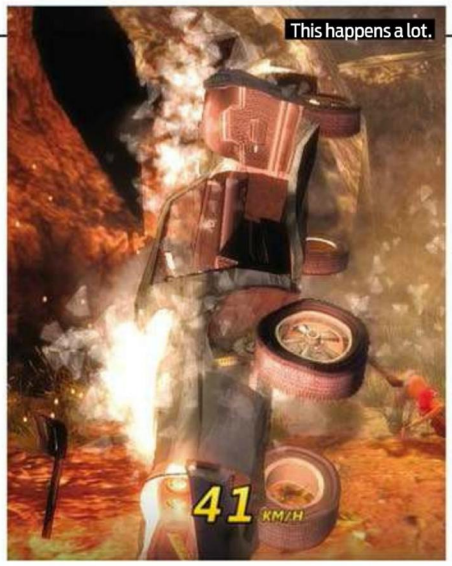

FLATLINE

FLATOUT 3: CHAOS AND DESTRUCTION. Dead loss and frustration, more like. *By Henry Winchester*

Need to know

What is it?
A chaotic, demolition-based racer

Influenced by
Flatout 2, *Carmageddon*

Play it on
2GHz CPU, 2GB RAM, Nvidia 8600 or ATI X2600

Alternatively
Flatout Ultimate Carnage, 82%

Copy protection
Steam

Just 20 yards into my first ever race in *Flatout 3: Chaos and Destruction* and I'm completely stuck between a girder and a wall underneath a bridge. No amount of acceleration or reversing can free me from this steel-and-asphalt trap. As I watch my opponents speed by, I realise I prefer it this way.

Chaos and Destruction has been developed by Team 6 rather than *Flatout*'s original developers BugBear, and they've thrown in just about every racing mode imaginable as if to compensate for the switch. There's a bog-standard race, a demolition derby, a challenge mode, a rainy night mode, a monster truck mode, a speed racing mode, an offroad mode and the series' signature stunt man mode. And they all unequivocally suck.

Team 6 seem to have based the driving model in all modes on a 30-year-old dodgem. The simple act of steering sends your car off at completely random tangents, sometimes nudging the car a few degrees, and sometimes sending it flying across the track. And, correct me if I'm wrong, but braking usually brings your vehicle to a halt. Here, it sends your car frictionlessly arcing around the course like a giant metal air hockey puck.

Crashing is incredibly easy, and not in a good way. Whereas the previous *Flatouts* used big, wide streets to provide impromptu demolition derbies, here the tracks are far tighter. One slip of the steering wheel and you careen into what inevitably proves to be a strangely immovable object, totalling your car. Sometimes you'll respawn on top of other cars, and other times it's race over.

Surfaces apparently make no difference to your car's speed either. One level – set in the Coliseum – features the most useless, perfunctory grass in the world. In this level, the AI cars seemed content to hump the ancient rocks provided as scenery, leaving me free to ram them into oblivion. The AI vehicles are similarly suicidal on other tracks, often driving themselves into lakes or taking shortcuts to nowhere.

Flatout's stuntman mode – in which your driver is launched from their car into a variety of targets – is replicated awfully here. In the first games, these were overblown showcases in grand arenas, but here they're reduced to obtuse hidden target hunting. I was able to complete every one of them by launching my driver out of the car and then dragging his quivering corpse around using 'aftertouch'.

The original *Flatouts* proved an anarchic – if slight – diversion from the po-facedness of the modern racer. But *Chaos and Destruction*'s unremitting awfulness drains all the joy and fun from the franchise, leaving a hollow shell of a paint-by-numbers racer. When smashing your multi-thousand-horsepower vehicle head on and full pelt into another racer feels flat and empty, you know something's up.■

◆ **Expect to pay** £25 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Strategy First ◆ **Developer** Team 6
◆ **Multiplayer** 24 players if you can find them ◆ **Link** www.strategyfirst.com

VERDICT

This is an immense disservice to the *Flatout* franchise, and one that makes *Flatout 2* look like a vehicular ballet.

PC GAMER 28

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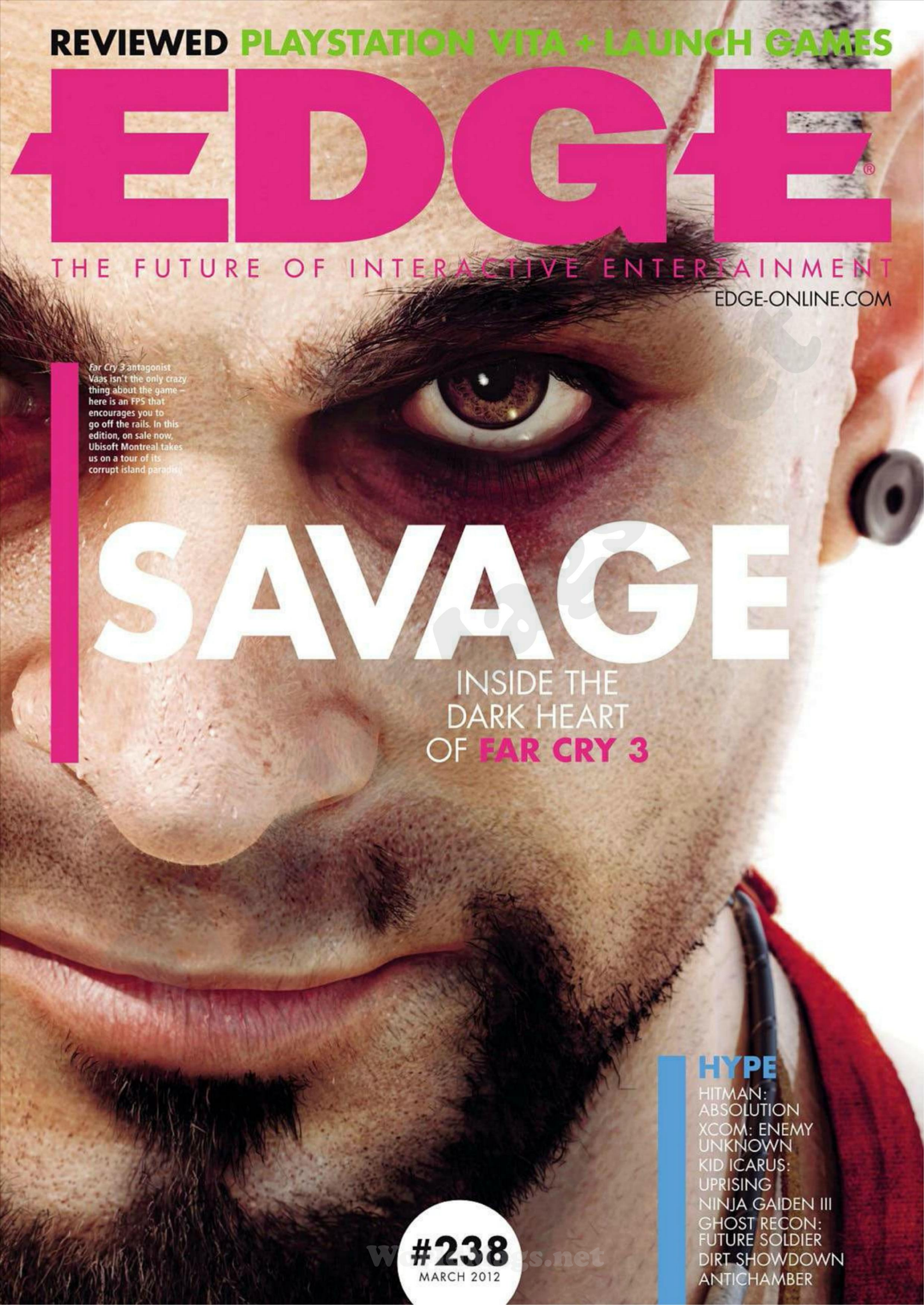


Far Cry 3 antagonist Vaas isn't the only crazy thing about the game – here is an FPS that encourages you to go off the rails. In this edition, on sale now, Ubisoft Montreal takes us on a tour of its corrupt island paradise

SAVAGE

INSIDE THE DARK HEART OF **FAR CRY 3**

HYPE

HITMAN: ABSOLUTION
XCOM: ENEMY UNKNOWN
KID ICARUS: UPRISING
NINJA GAIDEN III
GHOST RECON: FUTURE SOLDIER
DIRT SHOWDOWN
ANTICHAMBER

#238
MARCH 2012

PLANE CRAZY

X-PLANE 10 only comes with one level, but it's 510,065,600km^2 in size. ***By Tim Stone***

Need to know

What is it?
A globe-spanning civilian flight sim with unique 'blade element' flight modelling.

Influenced by
Austin Meyer's background in aeronautics

Play it on
3GHz multi-core CPU, 4GB RAM, 1GB 3D card

Alternatively
FSX, 86%

Copy protection
Disc check

The eight DVDs' worth of scenery files have been installed, the joystick has been configured, and the cat has been fed. *The moment has come.*

Excitedly, I type the name of my local aerodrome into *X-Plane 10*'s search box and press 'GO TO THIS AIRPORT'. A minute or two passes, then one of the dullest splash screens I've ever seen dissolves to reveal...

Hmm.

Lifting the camera high above the high wing of a handsome US Army Stinson L-5, I see hills draped with field textures stretching to a distant horizon. What I don't see is *a single 3D tree or building.* I check the scenery settings. As I thought: 'airport detail' is notched at 'totally insane', 'number of objects' at 'tons'. In vanilla *FSX* this bucolic Hampshire strip looked like it was situated in a wooded corner of Tuscany. *X-Plane* makes it look like it's in the middle of a deserted Hebridean isle. I think I prefer the Tuscany version.

Then again, in *FSX* I don't remember the hill fort on the southern edge of the airfield looking quite so hilly, or the downland ridge to the east looking nearly so pronounced. Perhaps those hours of scenery installation were worth it after all. Let's see what the land looks like from the air.

As the Stinson bumps along the undulating turf and hauls itself into a breezy summer sky, I spot something I've never seen in any iteration of *Flight Simulator* – the little B-road that runs along the northern perimeter of the field. I begin to follow the tarmac squiggle. An hour later I land back where I started with a quite different opinion of the sim's scenic strength.

While Laminar Research's new autogen scenery system leaves large tracts of the globe balder than a baboon's bum, makes central London look like suburban Los Angeles, and occasionally puts bridges and electricity pylons where bridges and electricity pylons have no business to be, its utilisation of detailed highway data and fine elevation mesh means low-level 'VFR' navigation is actually a far more practical prospect than it is in an unaugmented install of *FSX*. You won't see your house in *X-Plane 10* – you might not even see your village or suburb – but there's a very good chance you will see your road, avenue, close, or lane.

That Austin Meyer and chums haven't found the time to add hangars and towers to every tin-pot airfield isn't a great surprise. What is a little disappointing is that the sim's representation of major airports and capitals is still far below the *FSX* benchmark. Weary passengers stepping out of their Jumbos at JFK, Heathrow, or Charles de Gaulle will find tracts of bare concrete where terminals should be. I know I can pop along to *x-plane.org* and download decent user-made solutions, but the new autogen code really should have been savvy enough to slap down some generic structures as a stopgap.

Under control

Oh well, at least the invisible control towers have invisible air traffic controllers inside them at long last. After the scenery and graphics progress, this edition's most substantive improvements are its AI traffic and interactive ATC. In the past, *X-Plan*ing offline was a dashed lonely business. The closest you came to interaction was accidentally mincing a migrating goose with your prop or turbofan. In *X-Plane 10* you can wave at passing planes (though there are never more than a handful of these aloft at any one time) and exchange pleasantries with several different types of tin pusher.

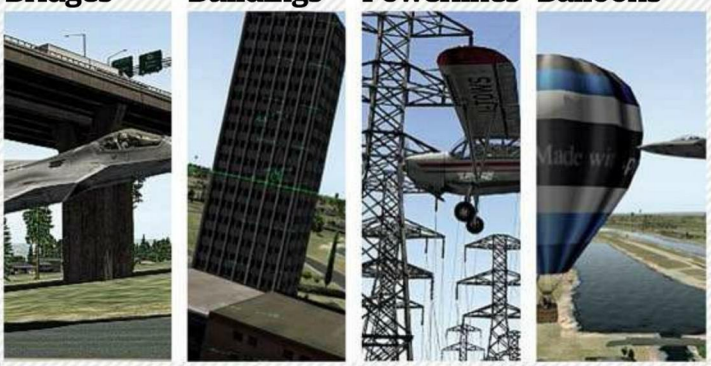
I say 'exchange pleasantries'... The text-based ATC menu only lets you file IFR flight-plans and request clearances. It's a more realistic treatment than Microsoft's (you must manually tune radios at each stage of a journey which means consulting maps and fiddling with small dials). It's also a little less reliable. Controllers will

"*X-Plane* is more of a hobby than a game"

Low-level perils

Which of these hazards pose the most danger?

Bridges **Buildings** **Powerlines** **Balloons**



Answer: They're all equally harmless. Sadly, only terra firma detects collisions at the moment.

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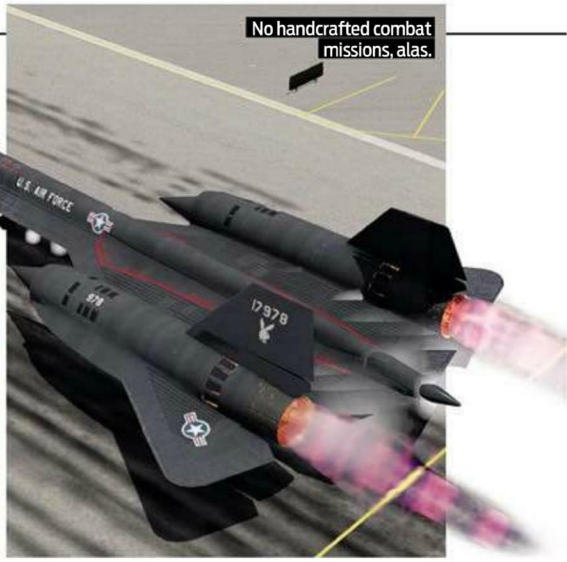
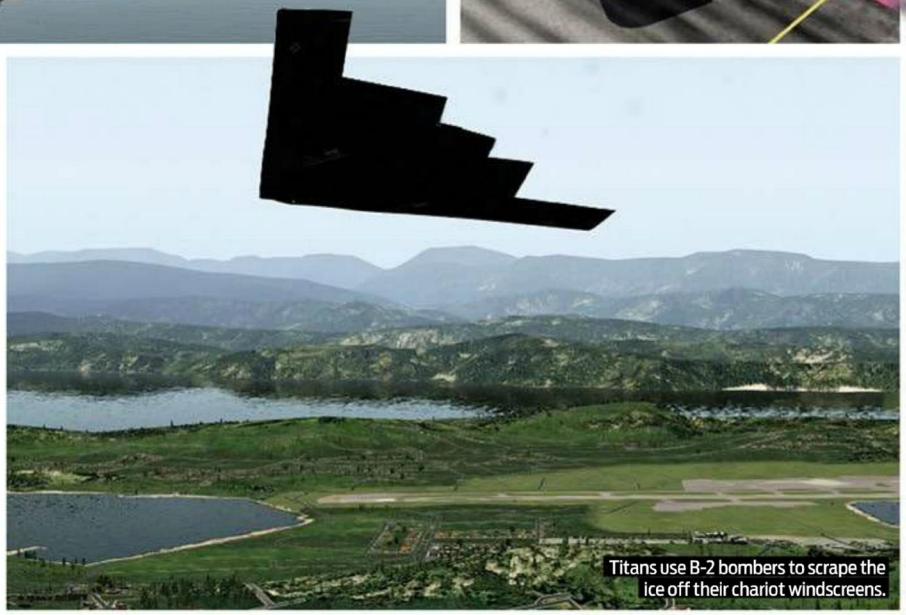
Space Shuttles are disgracefully lazy.



No handcrafted combat missions, alas.

PULL UP! PULL UP! PULL UP!


Titans use B-2 bombers to scrape the ice off their chariot windscreens.

There's 2D panels for those that prefer them.

Stone's Stonebaked Pizzas deliver anywhere.

WorldMags.net

occasionally lapse into sulky silences or infuriating repetition. At times you'll be told to taxi in circles or trundle through waiting aircraft.

Considering Laminar don't have an impatient publisher breathing down their neck, the number of gremlins in this release is startling. Every day in addition to those ATC meltdowns, I've endured three or four crashes. CTD causes range from bad saves and corrupt plane files, to systems failures (*X-Plane* features wonderfully sophisticated aircraft malfunction modelling. Almost every element of a plane is vulnerable to random failures). In normal circumstances, I'd be dismayed. Knowing the way that Austin and his crew work, I'm merely disappointed.

X-Plane nation

Buying an edition of *X-Plane* isn't like buying the latest iteration of *Microsoft Flight Simulator*. You're effectively purchasing the sim *plus* the next few years' worth of updates and improvements. By the time version 11 flops onto the runway, many of the issues highlighted in this review will have vanished like wind-combed vapour trails.

The question is: will you have vanished too? Does *X-Plane 10* have enough going for it to warrant a few months of stiff-upper-lip stoicism? If you're a *Microsoft Flight Sim* user still bitter about *FSX*'s feeble framerates, I reckon the answer is a clear 'aye'. Though the swiftness that characterised the indie pretender in its early days has been sacrificed on the altar of autogen and fancy rendering, it still outperforms its plodding peer in most circumstances. How much of this edge is down to cannier coding, and how much is down to emptier vistas, it's hard to say.

For PC pilots searching for sim steeds that look and handle exactly like their real-world equivalents, the decision is more difficult. *X-Plane* uses 'blade element' theory to determine its flight models. Put crudely, the way an aircraft behaves is determined by the shape of its 3D model and the output of its engine, rather than a table of scrupulously researched data. While this unusual approach together with the sim's bundled aeroplane editor (not for the faint of heart) is a boon for aspiring aircraft designers, its benefits to the realism-hungry simmer are questionable. Because CPUs still struggle to model the air flows swirling round fuselages and aerofoils, and modellers don't always replicate every dimple and protuberance on those fuselages and aerofoils, *X-Plane*'s Cessna 172 and Beechcraft Baron don't necessarily fly more plausibly than *FSX*'s Cessna 172 and Beechcraft Baron.

As in Microsoft Aces' swansong, many of your finest flying experiences are likely to come via payware and freeware add-ons. Though the large default hangar houses some very fine machines (the new Jumbo and Stinson are especially lovely) a lot of its exotic inmates are inherited from older versions, and have, frankly, seen better days. Strong candidates for the cutter's torch include virtual cockpit-less old-timers like the Sea Harrier and 777.

Other groups that may not cleave to *X-Plane* include sim novices and those who like their aviation structured and spiced with adventure. There are no formal tutorials in *X-Plane* and the closest thing to scenarios are 'situations'. With a couple of clicks you can set up a carrier or oil rig approach, fight a forest fire, or attempt mid-air refuelling. Once you've tired of these sideshows, the assumption is that you'll spend most of your time making your own fun by gallivanting around the globe on self-generated sorties.

It's a reasonable assumption. With an entire Earth to roam – an Earth enveloped by Laminar's impressively fluid/fearsome weather fronts – and an Aladdin's aerodrome of user-made content waiting to be downloaded, *X-Plane 10* is more of a hobby than a game.

Is it better sim than *FSX*? Possibly not, but choosing between these two winged wonders is becoming increasingly tricky. ■

Vying vistas

FSX vs *X-Plane*, the scenery showdown

LA INTERNATIONAL
Winner: FSX
KLAX without terminals, towers, or hangars, just isn't KLAX. First blood to *Flight Sim*.

THE GRAND CANYON
Winner: X-Plane
It's close, but *X-Plane*'s superior shadows and textures make for a grander Grand Canyon.

THE LAKE DISTRICT
Winner: X-Plane
The newcomer's ravishing reflections mean it's the clear winner in the Lake District test.

LONDON
Winner: FSX
Laminar hit London harder than the Luftwaffe. Where's Big Ben, Tower Bridge, and St Pauls?

"The number of gremlins in this release is startling"

VERDICT

Plenty of progress especially in areas like graphics and ATC, but don't toss aside Microsoft's *FSX* quite yet.

PC GAMER **78**

◆ **Expect to pay** £52 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Laminar Research ◆ **Developer** In-house
◆ **Multiplayer** LAN, Internet ◆ **Link** www.x-plane.com

WorldMags.net

Rear wheel drive in the rain is the ultimate test of skill.

What next, a gouraud shading revival?

The BNP's budget for company cars is clearly as slim as its credibility.

The absence of a Quincy Jones score is criminal.

TYRED

In the last lap of the *Race 07* series, **RACE INJECTION** is suffering from engine trouble. ***By Mike Channell***

Need to know

What is it?
The final spurts of DLC for *Race 07*, bundled with the ageing sim itself.

Influenced by
Reality, nothing else

Play it on
1.7GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 128MB DX9 3D card

Alternatively
Formula One 2011, 88%

Copy protection
Steam

By rights, the car in *Race Injection* that I should be most excited about driving is the Pagani Zonda R. It's like Satan's own chariot – a wailing, terrifying banshee of a vehicle, throwing out 750 horsepower. But the thing about the Zonda R is that, more often than not, it's driving *you* rather than the other way around. Hanging onto it is like being dragged around by a rodeo bull.

The true star of *Race Injection* can be found buried in the 'Retro Cool' category. Time and time again I find myself staring at the dashboard of the classic Mini Cooper S. It's endlessly chuckable, making a mockery of the more powerful cars in its class, and I adore the way it cocks a hind leg around the faster corners as if it's marking its territory – which in a way, it is. Mash the brakes and you feel the car squirming underneath you, coax it into a slide and you have all the feedback you need to avoid flying off the road completely.

It's a testament to one of the most enduring and communicative physics models around that the Mini is quite so much fun. The key word there, though, is enduring. *Race 07* forms the base for the Frankenstein's Monster of DLC that is *Race Injection*. That's a game that felt geriatric three years ago. Playing it now is like stumbling into a primeval era before shadows, shaders and motion blur. Because the focus was always realism rather than any kind of stylisation, it's aged dreadfully. The car models themselves are tolerable – their sponsor-heavy liveries distract from any rough edges – but the circuits are angular wastelands, awash with repeating grass textures and hauntingly featureless cardboard spectators.

It's not just the visuals that make *Race Injection* feel dated: the new cars do as well. Granted, gamers who never played *Race 07* get a healthy dollop of circuits, cars and championships for their 20 notes – don't get me wrong, this *was* a great game. For veteran players though, (particularly those who already own the original *STCC*), the bulk of the new content consists of updated versions of the touring car models that have been pounding *Race 07*'s virtual asphalt for nearly five years. *Race 07*'s endlessly flogged brand of touring car racing is entertaining enough, but there'll be few sim-heads that missed it the first, second or third time around. Familiarity breeds contempt and this all feels awfully familiar.

At least this is an avowed last hurrah – a lethal injection for an already long-dead racehorse. Next year *GTR3* arrives with a fresh engine and, hopefully, some fresh ideas. If you've never played *Race* before, feel free to fill your Alpinestars boots with a diverse and meticulous, if elderly sim. If you were there four years ago, drop four quid on the *Retro* DLC, hoot your way through a few laps in the Mini and then leave the poor thing be.■

◆ **Expect to pay** £20 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Namco Bandai/Steam ◆ **Developer** Simbin
◆ **Multiplayer** Up to 25 ◆ **Link** www.simbin.se

VERDICT

The once proud sim-racing marque splutters across the finishing line and slowly rolls to a halt. Time for a new model.

PC GAMER **64**

WorldMags.net

FOR FLOCK'S SAKE

Surprise! **HOME SHEEP HOME 2** is way better than you think. ***By Duncan Geere***

This is a puzzle game starring Shaun the Sheep. WAIT, DON'T TURN THE PAGE. It's actually really, really good. Allow me to explain.

You control three sheep, who have to navigate a series of platforming levels to get to the exit. Each has slightly different abilities. Timmy can fit into small gaps, Shirley can shunt things around, and Shaun sits in the middle and has impressive leaping and starring-in-Christmas-television abilities.

What elevates this above other platforming puzzlers is the sheer imagination in the level design. You'll find yourself being fired out a chimney, jumping between fountains in Trafalgar Square, or using magnets to pull around a giant pendulum. If you're paying attention, you'll spot references – some obvious and some less so – to *Portal*, *Mario Galaxy*, *Braid*, *Commander Keen* and *Frogger*.

The learning curve is gentler than the bleat of a newborn lamb. Three episodes, of 15 puzzles each, slowly ramp up the challenge, but while some are surprisingly tricky, it's never frustrating. If you do get stuck, there's a fine hints system. It's not long – I finished it in an afternoon – but it's packed with delights.

The watercolour art is perfect, landing just on the good side of twee, and the sound is fantastic too: one level has your sheep encased in glass domes, which make the most amazing noise as they clank together.

Home Sheep Home 2 might not seem the most obvious choice for the average PC gamer, but don't let Aardman's celebrity protagonist put you off. If you were ever in your life a child, you'll love it. ■

PC GAMER **84**

This van is your ticket to a day out in London.

So that's how plumbing works.

◆ **Expect to pay** Free ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Aardman Digital
◆ **Developer** In-house ◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** www.homesheephome2.com

GOOD KNIGHT

Go medieval in **REAL WARFARE 2: NORTHERN CRUSADES**. ***By Phil Savage***

Real Warfare 2 takes the real-time tactical strategy of *Total War* and combines it with an overarching RPG campaign map more akin to *Mount & Blade*. You play a Teutonic knight, travelling around 13th century eastern Europe defending castles, collecting taxes, trading goods and fighting everyone from toiling workers to lords backed by vast armies.

The RPG elements aren't very deep, but the campaign overworld feeds well into the battles. Every encounter is tense, and narrowly achieving a victory can be as damning as a defeat. Lose too many men and you're critically weakened, fearfully riding around the map hoping not to be ambushed before you can reinforce.

The battles are complex and involving – a staggering number of statistics govern your units' morale and performance. The most challenging battles arise from the main quests: set-pieces such as sneaking a small force into a castle, or facing flanking reinforcements from every corner of the battlefield.

But stick to these and you'll soon be blocked by an opposing force too large to conquer at your current level. You're obliged to build experience by ransacking villages and carrying out ride-by pikings on peasants. For a supposedly gallant knight, you'll be spending an awful lot of time acting like a dick.

The sheer grind can get tiresome, and while there is an auto-resolve for non-campaign battles, you lose too many units for it to be cost effective. Despite this shortcoming, *Real Warfare 2: Northern Crusades* is an engaging and enjoyable take on medieval strategy. ■

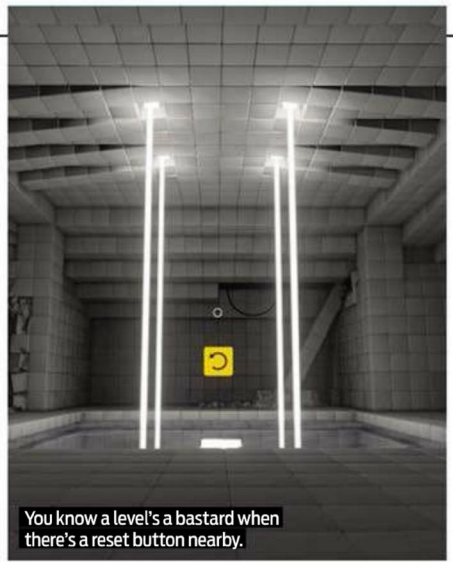
PC GAMER **71**

NPCs randomly wander the campaign map.

Archers will avoid direct combat. Badly, in this case.

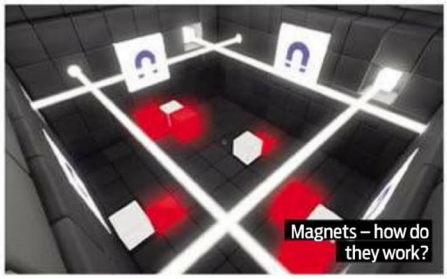
◆ **Expect to pay** £25 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** 1C
◆ **Developer** Unicorn Games ◆ **Multiplayer** Up to 4 online ◆ **Link** bit.ly/ub9PRt

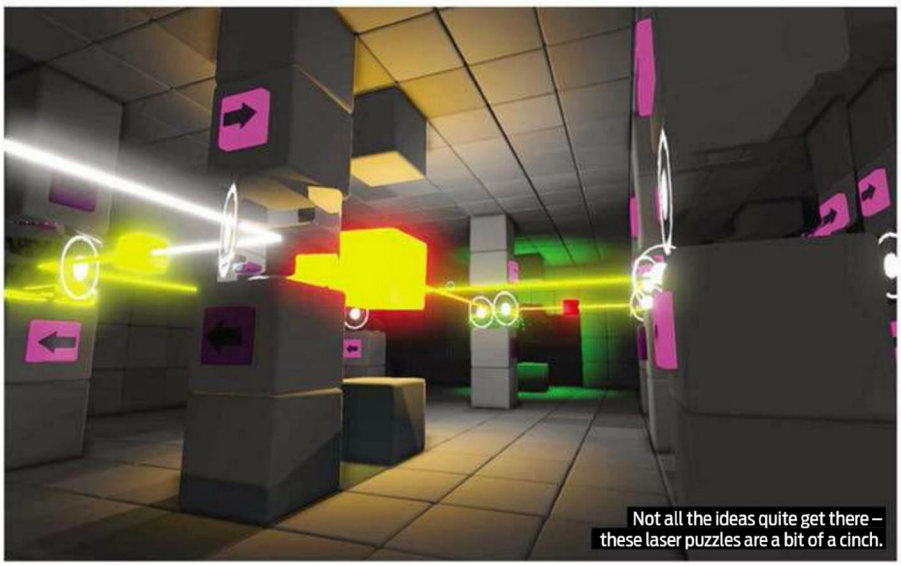
WorldMags.net


You know a level's a bastard when there's a reset button nearby.

Given the levels' geometric simplicity, they often manage to be quite striking.

The rooms even reconfigure and fall apart, like *Portal*'s.


Magnets – how do they work?


Not all the ideas quite get there – these laser puzzles are a bit of a cinch.

EXTRUDINARY

Indie puzzler **QUBE** tries thinking without portals. Apertureless science, so to speak. ***By Martin Davies***

Need to know

What is it?
An indie *Portal*-alike, but without the portals.

Influenced by
Portal, Narbacular Drop

Play it on
2GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, Nvidia 8000 series or higher 3D card

Alternatively
Portal 2, 94%

Copy protection
Steam

Part game, part job application, *QUBE* is a first-person spatial puzzler set in a series of austere, white-panelled test chambers that you navigate and escape by way of handheld sci-fi gadgetry. It's a lot like *Portal*. In fact, it's pretty much a handwaving bid to become the next *Narbacular Drop* – the student project that proved so delicious its developers were hurriedly slurped up by Valve Corp.

QUBE doesn't offer anything quite so elegant as the portals themselves, however, or even the propulsion gels of Valve's sequel. Instead, its core conundrum centres on the coloured blocks that extrude from the surfaces of its clinical test-chambers. Different colours do different things when activated by line-of-sight. Click on a blue block and it will recess into the floor, popping back out when you walk over it to propel you into the air. Yellow blocks come in a three-pack and elongate in a different height order depending on which block you click first. Red blocks extrude one segment per click. As you hop from one to another and to the exit, it seems a mundane foundation in contrast to *Portal*'s space-splicing gimmickry.

It also takes a little too long for *QUBE* to layer-on the complicating factors that make its later levels a formidable challenge: balls that need to be bounced into special zones, lasers that need to pass through crystals of the right colour, rooms that need to be rotated like giant, inverted Rubik's cubes.

Some of the most dastardly puzzles introduce magnets that effectively change the gravitational forces acting on free-floating blocks, which you herd into place by extruding different bits of scenery and flipping magnets on and off. It can be a fudge, however, thanks to the way some unseen code massages the laws of physics. A ball will sometimes drop like a dead weight and at other times will ricochet. One block will sometimes happily rest on another, even though only a few pixels of it are in contact, while at other times a seemingly innocuous nudge will send it spinning off. Rarely does this totally confound, but it does stop the game achieving the perfect, pat solutions of *Portal*.

So does it deserve to go on the top of Valve's CV mountain, or in the pile with the crank mail and Vortigaunt/G-Man slash fiction? It's not as good as *Portal*, certainly, and its deference to that game does a good job of constantly reminding you of the fact.

However, it's to *QUBE*'s credit that the majority of its flaws feel like limitations of budget, rather than failures of design. There are rough edges aplenty, and the game's shonky art assets and cursory narrative trimming feel like placeholders, but take it as no-frills *Portal* mod pack and there are ideas here worth winding your brain around – building blocks of a development talent almost as impressive as the game it apes.■

◆ **Expect to pay** £10 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Toxic Games ◆ **Developer** In-house
◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** qube-game.com

VERDICT

There's certainly potential here. *QUBE*'s unrefined ideas long for Valve's QA sheen – but they're smart ideas all the same.

PC GAMER **75**

WorldMags.net

I'm starting to regret that black pudding breakfast.

Kyoto is tantalisingly close to Hattori and Ikko Ikki homelands.

The *Blood Pack* makes a lot of mess.

Both clan packs include a new historical scrap.

THE ART OF GORE

Need more Mori or ickier Ikko Ikki? **SHOGUN 2**'s **DLC** can help. ***By Tim Stone***

Need to know

What is it?
A selection of *Shogun 2* supplements offering new units, factions and blood effects.

Influenced by
Kill Bill

Play it on
i5 CPU, 4GB RAM, 1GB 3D card

Alternatively
Squeezy ketchup and screen wipes.

Copy protection
Steam

Until Hubert de Montfort invented the world's first cauterizing sword in 1589, hacking people to death with sharp pieces of metal was a messy business. You can get an idea of just how messy by playing a *Blood Pack*-ed install of *Total War: Shogun 2*.

Not only is this gobbet of DLC bloody cheap, it's also bloody bloody. Where lethal spear lunges and cool katana coup-de-graces previously killed as discretely as poison-tipped umbrellas, they may now (it doesn't always happen) coax camera-spattering crimson fountains. In rare circumstances they can even lop limbs and detach heads. However many leather patches you've got on your cardigan, it's hard not to grin as the bonce of an out-fought ashigaru takes flight like a startled quail.

It looks like we're going to have to wait for the *Guts Pack* (TBC) to see steaming mounds of intestines, but even without disembowellings the *Total War* battlefield is now a truly gruesome place. Some Total Warriors claim this panders to the basest urges of its target audience. They have a point. Then again, they also have the choice not to buy.

Others reckon the gore option (it can be switched on and off at will) should have been gratis. Considering the rating headaches a free upgrade would have caused, I think Creative Assembly have done the sensible thing. I'm more than happy to pay a pound for this pulsating pound of flesh, and I suspect you might be too. **80%**

Whether you're willing to shell out for the *Hattori Clan Pack* released on the same day depends a lot on whether you're a Limited Edition owner, and whether you consider ninjas a delight or a distraction. If you bought the LE, you'll already know that the Hattori are the slyest faction on the map. Their seedy sake dens produce highly experienced and naturally gifted ninja agents, and their criminal syndicates enable unusually able battlefield Kishos. £2.99 seems a very fair price for the pleasure of their covert company, even if you only end up leading them for a couple of campaigns. **74%**

Just as characterful as the Hattori are the *Ikko Ikki*, another £2.99 DLC faction. This monkish power doesn't boast particular weapon specialities or any especially striking warrior types, but enmeshed in its bespoke starting conditions, skill trees, and unit selection are a set of morale advantages and commander talents that ensure distinctive expansion. Hate seeing your battle banners blanche? Go Ikko Ikki. **81%**

The one *Shogun* DLC I have trouble getting enthusiastic about is the focus-less *Sengoku Jidai Pack*. This £1.99 chocolate box adds a new fighter to each faction. More unit choices obviously bring more colour to the killing fields, but they also bring more potential confusion, more tactical muddiness. I have enough problems employing existing troop types sensibly without hand mortar teams, bulletproof samurai and long-yari ashigaru thickening the bafflement broth. **69%**

Nothing here is as unmissable as *Rise of the Samurai*, but to be fair, the prices reflect that. ■

◆ **Expect to pay** Between £1 and £3 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Sega ◆ **Developer** The Creative Assembly ◆ **Multiplayer** Up to 8 players
◆ **Link** www.totalwar.com/shogun2

WorldMags.net

BREAKTHROUGH

Hold still, **UNITY OF COMMAND**, while I pin this Knight's Cross on you. ***By Tim Stone***

Need to know

What is it?
A deceptively simple Eastern Front wargame in which logistics play a crucial role.

Influenced by
Panzer General, Chess

Play it on
2GHz CPU, 2GB RAM

Alternatively
Panzer Corps, 81%

Copy protection
Serial number

This game doesn't come with conventional AI. Buy it, and the Croatian devs mail you two giant, powder-filled jiffy-bags, one labelled 'Ferdinand Fuchs', the other 'Boris Bastardov'. Open these, add five gallons of vodka to the Boris bag and five gallons of schnapps to the Ferdinand, then stand back as two super-sly Ost Front generals materialise in front of you.

OK, that isn't 100% true, but there are times playing this exceptionally ergonomic hex wargame when you do have to remind yourself that you're not up against a real-life Zhukov or Manstein. When you're blitzkrieging towards an objective and realise the enemy has just sidestepped your assault, nipped into your rear, and severed your supply line. When a row of pummelled foes pulls back to man more tenable positions. When Ferdinand pickaxes a neat hole in the weakest section of your front, then pumps Grossdeutschland supermen through the breach... at humbling moments like these, the years that have gone into this two-man indie effort really show.

Unity isn't just smart, it's also flavoursome. There's an unmistakable Eastern Front tang to the 18 scenarios that make up the two campaigns. As the CO of Army Group South you'll have to learn to put up with partisan hassles, air superiority-negating blizzards, and fragile Romanian, Hungarian and Italian allies. Serving Stalin means accepting the innate inferiority of Ivan infantry corps. Whichever side you select, no advance is likely to commence without a long hard look at the supply map.

The barrels that automatically radiate from controlled railways and supply hubs are the lifeblood that keeps Tiger tanks tigerish, Katyushas kataclysmic. Much of the time, generals aren't looking to smash enemy units in one fell swoop, they're out to encircle and suffocate them over two or three turns. *Unity* – like the 1942-43 operations that inspired it – is all about turning bulges into pockets, salients into corpse-strewn kessels.

More in tune with its subject-matter than recent peer *Panzer Corps* (PCG 231), the game has a similarly trim interface and old-fashioned approach to campaigning. Because 2x2 have plucked their pleasingly petite battles chronologically from history, early campaign episodes aren't necessarily easier than later ones. Continuity is provided by a simple victory points mechanism: winning quickly in early outings means more funds for reinforcements later. It works, but you may find yourself picturing the battle engine married to something bolder – a strat-map perhaps.

Wherever this evocative engine heads next, discerning grogs are likely to follow it in droves. Wargames this fresh and friendly, featuring opponents as formidable as Ferdinand and Boris, tend to inspire deep loyalty. ■

◆ **Expect to pay** £25 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** 2x2 Games ◆ **Developer** In-house
◆ **Multiplayer** 2 players, online or hotseat ◆ **Link** www.unityofcommand.net

VERDICT

Doesn't overdo unit counts and under-engineer AI, unlike most East Front wargames. Wargame of the Year material.

PC GAMER **86**

WorldMags.net

I SERVED SADDAM

Babylon is burning in **STEEL ARMOR: BLAZE OF WAR**. *By Tim Stone*

Can't decide whether to spend the last of your Crimbo money on a top-notch sim or a fine military RTS? I've excellent news. Graviteam have mounted the turret of a high-fidelity tank sim on the chassis of a two-layer wargame.

You generate the missions in *SABoW*'s four operations yourself by moving platoon counters around a gridded map. When two opposing platoons meet, a skirmish spawns, dragging in nearby platoons and neighbouring grid squares.

You end up playing three intertwined games simultaneously. On the chess-like op map you're attempting to capture victory squares and ensure your units don't get cut off from repair and resupply (game #1). When skirmishes start you squeeze into your scrupulously modelled T-62 or M60A1 and do your bit as commander, gunner, driver or loader (game #2), pausing now and again to give orders to infantry via a traditional RTS interface (game #3).

As skirmishes feed back into the strat layer, and strat layer screw-ups and successes impact skirmishes, you are truly the master of your own fate. The scraps might not look or sound amazing, but the glorious unpredictability and generous level of realism make this easy to bear.

Setting your sim in three NATO-free '80s conflicts (Angola, the Iran-Iraq War, and the Russian invasion of Afghanistan), on the other hand, is a sure-fire way to cause publisher palpitations. Personally, I think the settings are inspired. After a diet dominated by bocage and steppe, fighting across the berms of Iraq, and the poppy fields of Afghanistan feels oh-so fresh. ■

PC GAMER **82**

◆ **Expect to pay** £20 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** UIG
◆ **Developer** Graviteam ◆ **Multiplayer** none ◆ **Link** www.graviteam.com

LINE RIDER

SWIFT*STITCH will help you sort right angles from wrong angles. *By Chris Donlan*

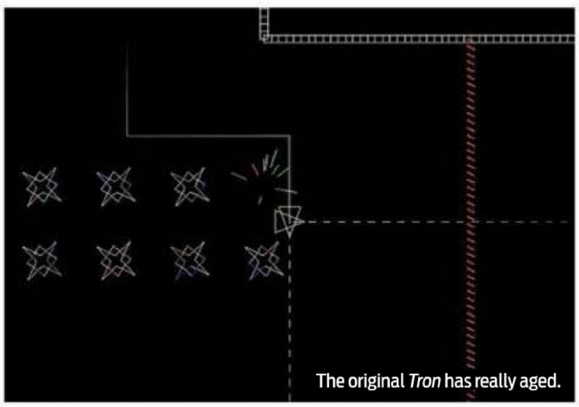
With a two-button control scheme and stark vector graphics, *Swift*Stitch* is as pared-down as games get. This is minimalism at its least forgiving: there's nothing to detract from potential flaws in the design.

For the most part this arcadey maze-runner gets away with it, largely because of the controls. Hold down Ctrl to move vertically, release it to move horizontally again. This weird setup is easily the game's best idea, shifting the whole thing from being a mere test of your reactions and encouraging you to play endless rounds of chicken with nearby walls.

Beyond that, it's down to the quality of the modifiers, and the way they're flung together across increasingly complex levels. The spacebar is on hand to give you a quick burst of bullet-time, best used while navigating chicanes. Passing blue and red barriers reverses your horizontal and vertical movement respectively, turning stages into smart little puzzles. Elsewhere lurk teleporters, collectables and speed boosts, and even sections where your craft starts to arc, causing you to sway woozily from side to side.

The campaign's 42 levels can be played at a range of speeds, but the game's most entertaining options are hidden away in the side challenges. A survival mode forces you to earn extra lives by living dangerously and hugging the walls; an endurance run chains teleporters together as you get faster and faster. Both offer a mean-spirited intricacy and a sense of cumulative danger the rest of the game too often shies away from. Without that touch of cruelty, *Swift*Stitch* is often elegant and clever rather than thrilling. ■

PC GAMER **71**



◆ **Expect to pay** £4.69 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Sophie Houlden
◆ **Developer** In-house ◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** swiftstitch.sophiehoulden.com

WorldMags.net

Expect to feel some serious ship-envy to begin with.

It looks sleek, but it's going nowhere fast.

You can stumble into warzones if you're not careful.

Space is prettier with the upgraded engine.

Mine these asteroids to slowly make a fortune.

INEXORABLE

Can the massive lasers of **X3: ALBION PRELUDE** bring extra excitement to the *X* universe? ***By Tom Senior***

Need to know

What is it?
A freeform space trading game in a corporate universe, now with added war.

Influenced by
Elite

Play it on
Core2 Duo CPU, DX9 3D card, 2GB RAM, 10GB HDD

Alternatively
EVE Online, 90%

Copy protection
Steam

The *Albion Prelude* expansion to *X3: Terran Conflict* adds a healthy dose of war to the exploration and freeform space trading sim, along with 30 new ships and a dynamic stock exchange designed to liven up *X3*'s commerce.

The tension between expansionist human colonists and the alien races that occupy the *X* universe has finally ignited, triggering a massive space war. *X*'s hungry corporations are taking advantage of this to create new business, and there's plenty of room for a lone entrepreneurial trader to make millions.

That lone trader is one of a series of pre-made starting profiles that present differing angles on the conflict. You can sign up as a fighter in the army and play through a lengthy series of combat missions. You can become a well funded intelligence agent in charge of building fleets. You can become a space pirate desperately trying to scrape out a living in the face of pursuing law enforcement agents. In typical *X* style, from these jumping-off points, you can go anywhere and do anything you like.

This sounds much more glamorous than it actually is. The ambition of *Albion Prelude* is undermined by the tedium and plodding pace of every basic action. As a trader you'll be picking up goods from one part of the universe and selling them for a profit a few systems away. The new stock exchange function throws open much of the behind-the-scenes workings that drive *X*'s economy, an excellent addition for those who want to play *X* as an absorbing galactic numbers game. But the act of docking, loading up and shifting your goods around to take advantage of a gap in the market takes so long that I often forgot what I was supposed to be doing by the time I reached my destination.

The space battles are much better, and act as a great showcase for the considerable graphical updates made by the expansion. *Albion Prelude*'s combat ships aren't lithe enough to allow for proper dogfights, and there's not much depth to the action, but the spectacle and sheer volume of lasers involved makes the combat pilot a good way in for new players. The campaign objectives get repetitive quickly, however, and there's almost no guidance or tutorials to guide you round *X*'s multi-layered interface.

When one battle went bad, I headed for the nearest stargate and deserted. "Sod this, I'll become a space pirate!" I thought. An hour later I found myself lost in the void, wading from system to system, still trying to find the first rung on the galactic trading ladder.

If you're willing to put up with the pace, *Albion Prelude*'s simulation of a universe in turmoil provides the most dynamic and interesting sandbox yet presented by the *X* series. If interacting with it wasn't such a pain, *Albion Prelude* would be a tremendous achievement. ■

◆ **Expect to pay** £20 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Egosoft ◆ **Developer** In-house
◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** bit.ly/y2nyPa

VERDICT

A deep, interesting trading sim that demands unnecessary amounts of patience. Atmospheric, ambitious and frustrating.

PC GAMER **69**

WorldMags.net

PISTE OFF

WINTER SPORTS 2012 is skating on very thin ice. ***By Phil Savage***

I've never been on a skiing holiday, nor taken more than a passing glance at the Winter Olympics, so I can't say with 100% certainty that this game is inaccurate in its depiction of alpine athletics.

I suspect it is. Either that, or motorbikes cease to be bound by Newtonian physics when placed on snow, and I never knew. Also, skiers can build momentum by simply squatting, even if they're going uphill. And curling is played exclusively by people with bad wigs.

That said, if it turns out humans *do* have a turbo boost and I just never heard about it, I'm going to feel pretty stupid.

It doesn't take long for *Winter Sports 2012* to raise enough red flags to plot a slalom course: this is a Wii port, and a particularly bad one. There's a whole host of problems, most notably the terrible control system that's set up for two people sharing a keyboard even when played solo, and anti-aliasing more jagged than the mountain peaks you're racing down.

The events themselves are tedious, uninspired minigames. All of them are a chore to play, neither capturing the challenge of a realistic simulation or the compulsive charm evident in the best casual titles.

Compete in the ironically named Big Cup and you'll play through all ten sports in under an hour, most of it taken up by slight variations on the same skiing event. There are challenges to pad out the content, but attempting to complete specific goals with the awkward controls is an exercise in frustration.

If this was a budget release, it would merely be a rubbish game. At full price, it's unforgivable. ■

PC GAMER 14

The glacially slow curling tournament.

Oh, stop smiling. All you did was mash some buttons.

◆ **Expect to pay** £30 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** DTP
◆ **Developer** 49Games ◆ **Multiplayer** Four-player hotseat ◆ **Link** bit.ly/vqYJQP

ELDER SIDE-SCROLLS

SATAZIUS keeps going forward, but never loses its decrepit formula. ***By Henry Winchester***

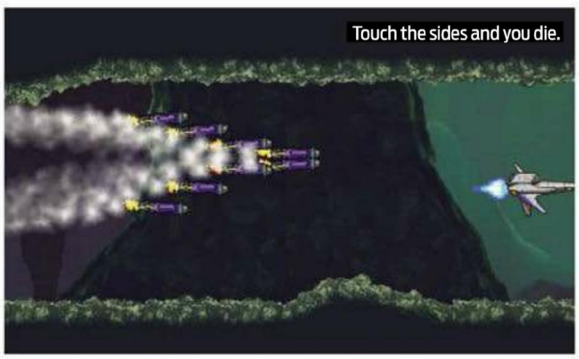
Japanese publishers Capcom recently signed a deal to bring their home country's best indie games over to the west. Their debut is *Satazius*, a side-scroller so resolutely old-school that it probably has an inkwell in its desk.

Anyone who's ever played a side-scroller – or seen one, or understands the concepts of both 'sideways' and 'scrolling' – will know what to expect. You control a spacecraft while blamming away with infinite ammo and bombs far bigger than said spacecraft. You face all manner of creatures: space worms, space walky things and space giant faces.

Satazius does absolutely nothing new with this age-old genre. Games such as *Limbo* and *Braid* have taken the platform genre and twisted it into new and meaningful experiences; *Satazius* feels like something from 15 years ago. The resolution is stuck at good old 640x480. Pressing the Escape key doesn't take you to a menu, it quits the whole game. And you can forget about any fancy 3D effects – *Satazius* is more two-dimensional than an episode of Neighbours.

Despite its lack of innovation, there are times when this is a pleasing trip down memory space-corridor. Sometimes the pumping trance soundtrack and flashing visuals come together to generate just the slightest amount of euphoria. Even on the easiest difficulty setting it's a reminder of how bloody hard games used to be: there's no regenerating health and only a handful of savepoints on each level. My 15-year-old self would have been blown away by *Satazius*. The problem is that my 15-year-old self has grown up – and so have games. ■

PC GAMER 60


Touch the sides and you die.

If you look closely, you can actually see the rasterisation.

◆ **Expect to pay** £4.50 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Capcom
◆ **Developer** Astro Port ◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** www.capcom.com

WorldMags.net

Windows®: Life without walls™, PC Specialist recommends Windows 7

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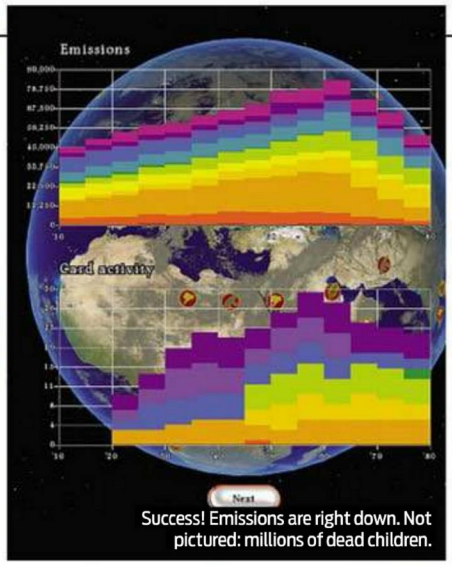
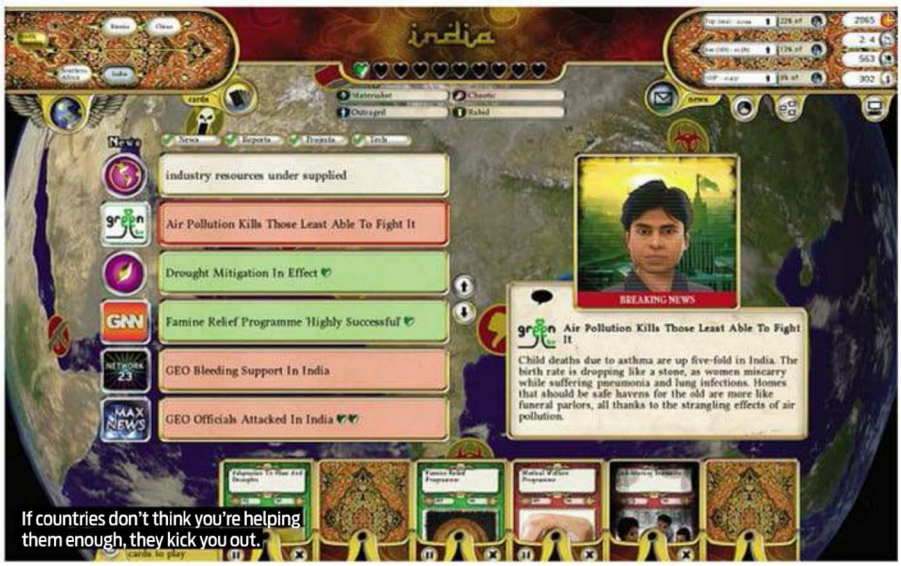
You'd think camels would like the toasty new Earth. But they all died. Ingrates.

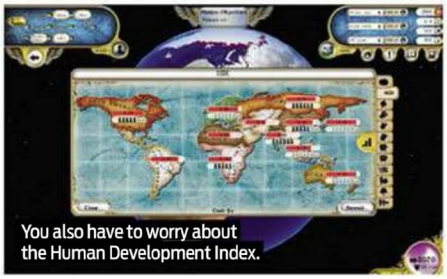
Each region might have 50 available cards to play at any given time.



Success! Emissions are right down. Not pictured: millions of dead children.



If countries don't think you're helping them enough, they kick you out.


You also have to worry about the Human Development Index.

FRACKED UP

Oil wells that end well? Not in revamped eco-sim **FATE OF THE WORLD: TIPPING POINT**. *By Martin Davies*

Need to know

What is it?
A sim about the world-ending environmental nightmare that will engulf us all.

Influenced by
Global Warming Interactive, reality, science

Play it on
2.33GHz CPU, 512MB 3D card, 2GB RAM

Alternatively
Global Warming Interactive

Copy protection
Steam

This is the way the world ends: not with a bang but with a protracted series of bangs, accompanied by famines, screaming winds, droughts, tsunamis and your lynching at the hands of a mob.

That's according to this tweaked, expanded re-release of 2011's global suicide strategy simulation and its DLC campaigns. A complex web of depressing data sets (global temperatures, unemployment, infant mortality rates and so on) have been crunched together to form a Megazord of human misery. Viewed at a global level, your purpose is to carefully usher humanity through these trying times, as icecaps melt, Russia erupts into civil war, Japan becomes a swamp and – oh God, why is Africa on fire *again*?

How do you accomplish this feat of planetary redemption? Well, mostly you don't, and the world burns. However, you can *try* – and you do this by deploying cards, before advancing five years and discovering that your good intentions caused children to die in their thousands. These cards are many and varied, and do such things as subsidise alternative fuels, defend against extreme weather and even violently oust hostile regimes. Bundled DLC campaigns, meanwhile, cleverly rejig the simulation to introduce refugee crises, or ignore climate change entirely, allowing you to focus on diminishing resources.

Human needs quickly crash into high-minded environmentalism. Put the brakes on polluting industries, and you economically annihilate the developing world. That's a problem because, as a rule, people with dead babies don't give a damn about carbon sequestration. In the end, all these cards can really do is feebly massage the model of planetary doom. You may reach the next century a little less dead than otherwise, but the game offers no silver bullet for these issues. This may be disheartening, but it's also fascinating, complex and important.

However, take *Tipping Point* on its merits as a game rather than an interactive roadmap to self-extinction, and it has issues of its own. The initial release was too hard to 'win', said some players. Well, that's accurate, said others. *Tipping Point* nonetheless introduces an easy mode – but that won't help you understand how this web of stats is held together, and which cards pull which levers. UI changes make it slightly simpler to turf through the pages and pages of telemetry, but the game still struggles to underscore the interrelationships.

At its core is a comprehensive and convincingly bleak simulation of climate change. Dig in, and you'll be rewarded with an understanding of the threat and the few small things we can do to mitigate it. Yet the desire to be a game often gets in the way of the raw data, and vice versa. In the end *Fate* is something of an ugly compromise – but given the choices we have to make as a species, maybe that's only appropriate.■

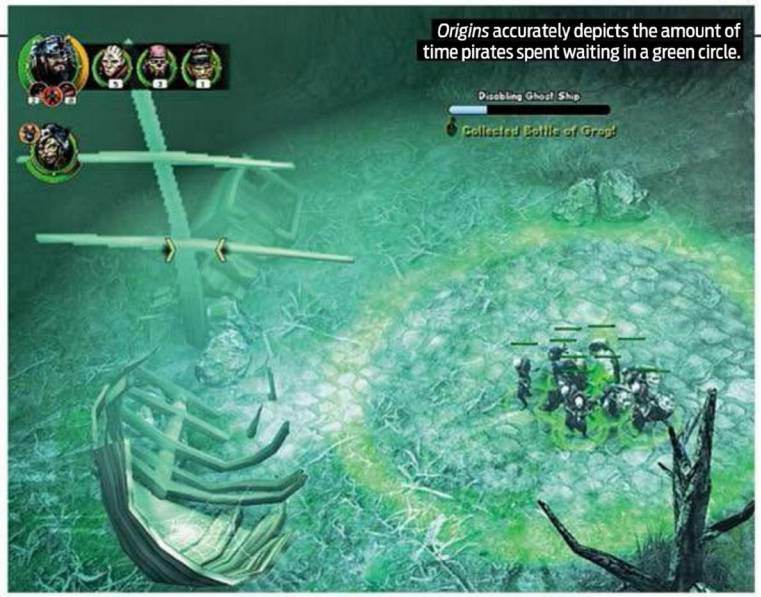
◆ **Expect to pay** £15 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Red Redemption ◆ **Developer** In-house
◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** fateoftheworld.net

VERDICT

A terrifically detailed and appropriately terrifying sim. Expanded and slightly improved, but still an opaque and cruel game.

PC GAMER **69**

WorldMags.net



GROGGY

All hands on dreck with the PIRATES OF BLACK COVE: ORIGINS. *By Chris Thursten*

The hybrid RPG-RTS *Pirates of Black Cove* didn't make waves because of its story. It ploughed straight into the whirlpool of clichés from which such disappointments as Pirates of the Caribbean sequels and Talk Like A Pirate Day periodically emerge.

It's confusing, then, that *Origins* is a narrative-focused piece of DLC. Rather than flesh out the original game's qualities, Nitro Games have opted to tell archvillain Captain Grog's backstory through four dialogue-heavy combat missions. Unfortunately, *Origins* is painfully unfunny and its actual plot would fit into a short sentence.

Banter between crewmates attempts to add character, but feels like being stuck watching a college comedy revue where everyone got to write their own jokes. At one point, a character makes a reference to "MTV raps". It would be overgenerous to put this down to a dodgy translation.

Black Cove's land combat is barebones squad-based RTS. You click on pirates, and then you make pirates stand around to capture things. That's it. It's *Dawn of War* without such supporting mechanics as reinforcements and cover. There's no naval combat and no crew building – nothing to mask *Pirates of Black Cove*'s basic lack of depth. *Origins* was an opportunity to add a bit of variety, but even in its short length – less than an hour – it fails.

Occasional difficulty spikes expose more flaws. The unit selection is fiddly and imprecise, making targeting specific enemies frustrating. More seriously, there's no checkpointing or manual saves – losing a key character late in a mission means restarting the whole thing. If this is deliberate, it's a failed attempt to add tension to a lacklustre combat system.

If you weren't a big fan of the original's combat or writing, there's nothing to recommend about *Origins*. If you were, then there are far better uses of your £3.49. It'd also be worth double-checking that you actually exist. ■

PC GAMER 32

◆ **Expect to pay** £3.49 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Paradox Interactive ◆ **Developer** Nitro Games ◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** blackcovegame.com

DUKE NUKEM FOREVER – THE DOCTOR WHO CLONED ME

Given how obsessed with excrement *Duke Nukem Forever* was, it's apt that this mini-expansion resembles a polished turd. It's a better campaign, with some perfectly serviceable shooting sections in the second half, a Duke cloning facility with a couple of mildly amusing gags inside and, overall, it manages to *mostly* avoid the uncomfortable misogyny.

But it's still *Duke Nukem Forever*, which means limp weapons, pointless vehicle segments, awkward movement and frustrating platforming. While the length ensures no individual sequence drags on for too long, there's enough of the terrible stuff to drown out the scant few passable bits. ■

Phil Savage

PC GAMER 34

◆ **Expect to pay** £6.50 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Link** bit.ly/zOSuW9

WARHAMMER 40K SPACE MARINE – CHAOS UNLEASHED

Headlining this downloadable collection of multiplayer additions is Chaos Invasion, a Chaos Marine arena for Exterminatus. It's a nice addition to the co-op mode – a battle royale against Orks, Imperial Guard and Space Marines, with the increased roster of enemies adding some variety to the action.

But the biggest challenge this collection provides is playing it in the first place. With no dedicated playlists for new content, you're more likely to be placed in the more heavily populated base maps.

What *Chaos Unleashed* adds is solid, but there's nothing essential enough to warrant fighting against the game's lazy matchmaking system. ■

Phil Savage

PC GAMER 46

◆ **Expect to pay** £6.50 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Link** bit.ly/zmd1bD

WorldMags.net

SICKENER

POSTAL III beats Uwe Boll in the race to the bottom of the barrel. ***By Jon Blyth***

Need to know

What is it?
A third-person shooter that can't distinguish between good and bad attention.

Influenced by
Uwe Boll

Play it on
Pentium 4 3.0GHz, 4GB RAM, ATI X800, NVidia 6600 or better

Alternatively
Saints Row: The Third, 83%

Copy protection
None

Of all the jokes in *Postal III*, there's one that just about works. It's near the beginning, which is cruel, creating as it does the impression that there might be more jokes to come.

You work in a porn shop, hoovering up the tissues of masturbating patrons. It's invaded by Palin-esque hockey moms, so you flip from suck to blow, and so pelt the moral guardians with fresh fapkins. It's not fun to play, for reasons we'll come to. But there's a certain, undignified satisfaction in it.

Suck and blow. These are two things that *Postal III* will continue to do for some hours. It's a shooter, and a 'crazy' one at that. You'll be battling Mexican Japanese chefs for the rights to the town's FIV-infected cats. You'll deliver exploding dicks to a salad bar for Osama Bin Laden. This is how *Postal III* works best: single sentence summaries. But if the going exchange rate is a thousand words to paint a single picture, you can see how one sentence might not stretch to an entire videogame level.

It's like someone has learned the vocabulary of shock – AIDS, hobo, piss, Bin Laden – but never bothered picking up the grammar. It makes the Uwe Boll movie, in which Mini-Me is sex-attacked by monkeys, seem positively nuanced. This is the first videogame franchise to embrace a Uwe Boll movie as canon. That tells you something about *Postal III*'s level of ambition.

Rogue mail

Postal III cashes-in the open world of its predecessor for a matted clump of short corridors. There are no secret corners, because the game has nothing to hide. The enemy AI will ignore you, raise its guns before deciding to strafe harmlessly away, and when those arthritic subroutines recognise the Postal Dude as someone worth shooting, bullets barely scratch you.

That's not to say the game isn't difficult. It is. It *is* difficult, because it crashes so regularly. It's difficult because you never know who's got a Molotov because there are so few character models. Some missions lack checkpoints, some have doubly-moronic friendly AI to escort. Others simply throw 20 enemies at you at once. This last tactic, incidently, can be overcome by retreating around a corner and killing them as they conga into view.

One mission asks you to drop dolls off at Krotchy's Salad Bar. Can't find it? They didn't say, but it's in the mall. Oh, you tried the mall? Well, they didn't say, but you trigger the mall-entering cutscene by driving into the Segway shop on the road opposite. If *Postal* is supposed to be the story of a simple man driven to violence because his simple life has been made unbearable by idiots, then perhaps this whole game has a sophisticated existential point.

Probably not, though. *Postal III*'s lack of self-awareness is most agonisingly evident when it tries to be self-aware. "The physics in *GTA* are better," says Postal Dude, regularly. Really? You're going to get rid of your open world, and still go there? *Postal III* winks at the player, but it's hard to see when it's repeatedly punching you in the face.

The open-world missions that unlock upon completion give some clue to the developers' unrealised ambitions. Just buy *Postal 2* on Gog.com. It's got everything *Postal 3* has, plus an open world, 20% better jokes and Gary Coleman. And to anyone who thinks Bin Laden is edgy, insight-free gay jokes are hilariously un-PC, or that a badger melee weapon is rib-ticklingly surreal, please consider donating your organs to someone who'll use them. ■

"Deliver exploding dicks to a salad bar for Osama Bin Laden"

Weaponise me

Running with scissors would be more fun

Petrol & Piss
Just like in *Postal 2* nine years ago, you can whip it out and 'pee'. But what about number twosies?

Badger
Tolerably effective, but Postal Dude sings the 'Badger Badger Badger' song from 2003.

Krotchy dolls
A stuffed toy penis that explodes when people walk into it. These guys are outrageous!

Machinegun
A great way to finish the game without effort. Overpowered, underfun, almost lasts forever.

◆ **Expect to pay** $40 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Akella
◆ **Developer** Running With Scissors, Trashmaster Studios ◆ **Multiplayer** No ◆ **Link** postalgames.com

VERDICT

If you're going to be offensive, you need a point. This has none, either as satire, commentary, videogame or comedy.

PC GAMER **21**

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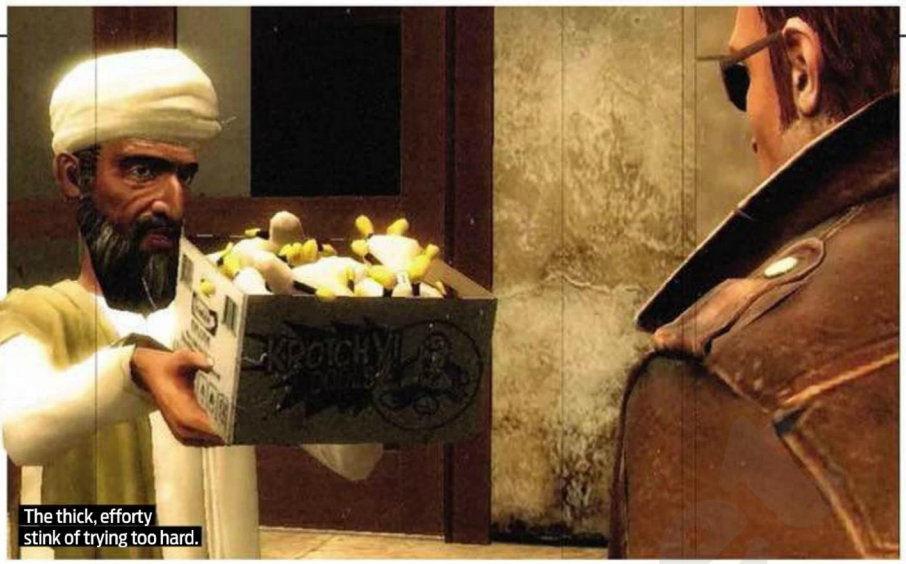

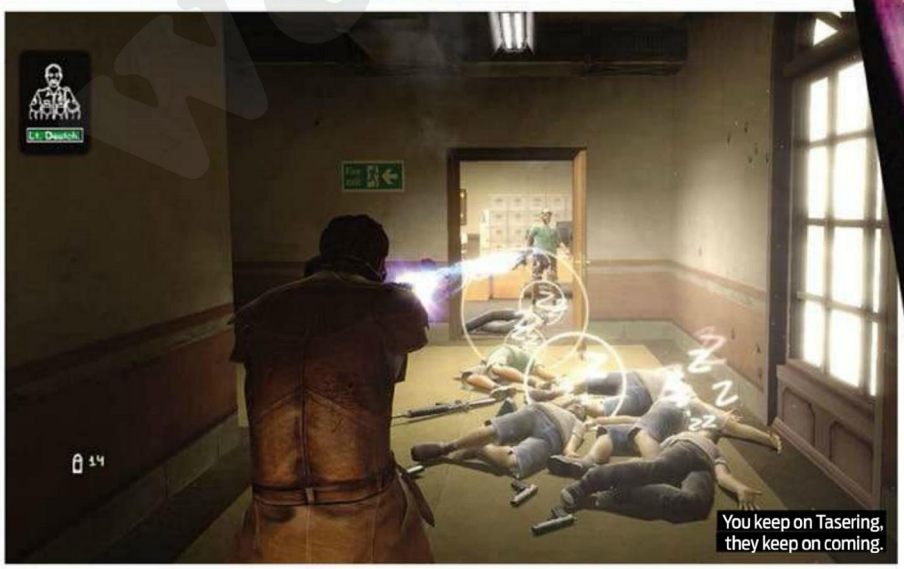

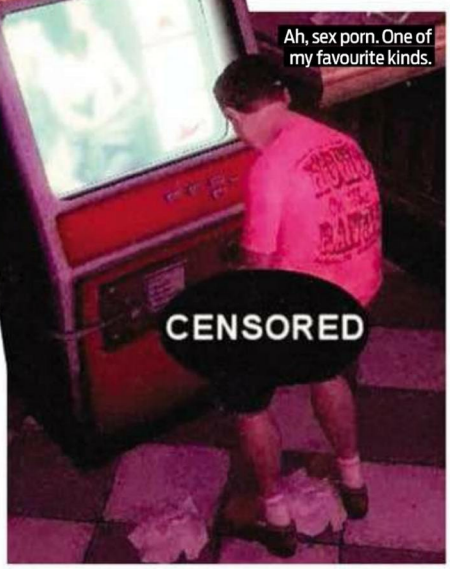

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AMORAL MAZE

Glide, slice and shear a path through the streets of Manhattan in **PROTOTYPE**

Need to know

What is it?
Skyscraper-scaling sandbox of murder.

Influenced by
The Spider-man, *GTA*

Play it on
Core 2 Duo 2.6GHz, 512GB 3D card, 2GB RAM

Alternatively
Just Cause 2, 88%

Moral ambiguity! It's a good thing. Every time we think of an argument in terms of good versus evil, we're chucking our intelligence into a bucket of custard and hooting along to a pantomime. Boo! That rich man is spending his fat cat's bonus on an orphan-punching device! But wait! A CGI labrador puppy has steered a jetski with his mouth and defused a nuclear bomb or something! Hooray!

Open-world superpowered brawler *Prototype* doesn't ask you to do the good vs evil schtick, but it's hardly a ballet through a moral maze, either. The predominant spiritual direction is "don't worry about it, it's a cool power. It's not like anyone matters except you and the one person you care about."

Alex Mercer, waking with insomnia, finds himself infected by the Blacklight Virus. Instead of it ravaging his body, he's able to glide, leap and transform his arms into tools that bludgeon and slice. He's an essential for any modern kitchen.

It's basically a superhero game, hold the heroics. Mercer is a moody, unlikable dick, his moments of humanity as few and far between as motorway service stations. His most notable power is to devour other people in order to look like them. This has obvious uses for stealth and infiltration. Also, ingest a VIP and you'll have a flashback that helps you piece together your memories, and fills in a gap on the rather self-importantly named 'web of intrigue'.

As the story unfolds, Manhattan develops from your average stressed metropolis to a panicked plague town. The percentage of pedestrians running and screaming increases smoothly from 0 to 100, as the number of honking great mutant beasts running amok ratchets up. The military respond in kind, bringing new kit into the field. Helicopters and tanks fill the streets, keeping pace with your own powers, and virus sensors help the soldiers spot you in disguise.

In terms of escalation, *Prototype* is pretty much bang-on. The power-ups are constant and varied. The mobility boosts all but turn you into a flying machine, and boosting your blade arm, hammerfist and other modes all do a great job of giving you more power, but asking you to be slightly more nuanced about using it. Come back to a fully powered-up character after a month away, and you won't have a clue how to use the intricate sod.

The weakest part of *Prototype* – apart from the fact it requires you to be the kind of person who privately awards himself points for running over pedestrians in *GTA* – is the city. There's not much of a sense of location about it. There's a parky bit, and obviously there's a metric spunkton of skyscrapers, but it doesn't reach out and throttle your immersion gland.

But at its new price, with that blast of short-term nostalgia making everything seem sexier, *Prototype* is absolutely worth checking out. ■

◆ **Expect to pay** £10.20 ◆ **Publisher** Activision ◆ **Developer** Radical Entertainment
◆ **Multiplayer** none ◆ **Link** prototypegame.com ◆ **First review** PCG 203, 86%

VERDICT

They're only 3D models and a couple of subroutines. Forget your empathy and eat yourself some civilians.

PC GAMER **88**

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TEUTONIC WATER

Give GOTHIC 3 a cuddle, it's been left out too long

If you're an arms-folded "well, entertain me then" Roman Emperor kind of gamer, European RPGs might leave you feeling a little unpampered. You have to get onboard, really want to believe. More so than is strictly sane, when literally translated idioms lead to characters saying chin-stroking nonsense like "it is a fat mouse who lives in a millionaire's bakery."

Gothic 3 marks a serious attempt to step away from that, with proper localisation and voice talent giving the game a more capable *Elder Scrolls* vibe. Caveat: that's not too much of a compliment to the script, given the shit they come out with in *Skyrim*. But this is a game that deserves more than many to break out of its easily-ignored corner of gaming.

That moral ambiguity we were talking about on the previous page is here in a more evolved form. The factions are neither good nor evil, they just have conflicting desires and methods. The Orcs aren't mindless Tolkien beasts or Warhammer fungi, they're medieval Klingons. You can join whoever you enjoy talking to, and affect the shift of power in the world.

At release, *Gothic 3* was buggy – but properly patched, the friendly AI's pathfinding has been fixed, the clip-snags are gone, and the other aspects of the game are left to shine. With a simple combat system that encompasses the inevitable Triforce – hand-to-hand, stealth and later on, magic – it's a great open world with a strong plot and interesting faction play. From the UK point of view, this is the best *Gothic* game in the series. Start and finish here. ■

PC GAMER 80

◆ **Expect to pay** £9 ◆ **Publisher** Steam ◆ **Developer** Piranha Bytes ◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** store.steampowered.com ◆ **First review** PCG 168, 71%

TIME COMMANDO

There's nothing sexier than power. That's what people in power would tell you. In fact, there's nothing sexier than a time commando in skintight yellow lycra, punching tigers and cavemen before hopping over to the Roman Empire and giving a bunch of gladiators a Platter To Share of dagger-in-face. Where else in time needs stabbing up? Why not deck some Conquistadors before taking your unique brand of monotonous *Streets of Rage*-esque lunging attack and side-hopping evasion into the modern battlefield?

It looks like low-res ass, the combat is simple and the traps cheap. You can get all the nostalgia you need out of YouTube – this isn't something you need to play. ■

PC GAMER 50

◆ **Expect to pay** £4 ◆ **Publisher** GOG.com ◆ **Developer** Adeline Software Intl ◆ **First review** PCG 34, 75%

DEMIGOD

In 2009, this was part of a bold new breed of action strategy games. Hero-led, with a big sexy wink to *Defence of the Ancients*. The paths of the two games couldn't have been more different. *DOTA* migrated to the international hit factory that is Valve. *Demigod* was the Danny DeVito twin. The multiplayer was cruelly borked in the opening weeks. There was no demo, making this difficult to describe new genre feel risky to a newcomer. A potentially great new game got lower scores than a working version deserved, and a suspicious public chose to thieve it. At £7 on Steam, think of this as a heroic chance to right a crinkle of injustice in time, and it'll tide you over if you're not on the *Dota2* beta. ■

PC GAMER 85

◆ **Expect to pay** £7 ◆ **Publisher** Stream ◆ **Developer** Gas Powered Games ◆ **First review** PCG 201, 81%

DESPERADOS 2: COOPER'S REVENGE

Ever wanted to hoist up your petticoat, and drive a man to distraction? Then, when he comes over like a slobbering cartoon wolf, blow makeup into his face to incapacitate him? If so, you've got admirably well-defined fantasies, and I hope you find a way to work them into a fulfilling sex life. In the mean time, you might find *Cooper's Revenge* a suitable outlet. An RTS centred on a few key characters (Kate O'Hara is your powder-blowing seductress, Cooper the hero), the game is hampered by uninspired enemy AI and missions more trial and error than puzzle inspiration. There is fun here, but you might prefer to put your butter-smeared pixel-blurring glasses on and go back to the 2001 original. ■

PC GAMER 66

◆ **Expect to pay** £4 ◆ **Publisher** GOG.com ◆ **Developer** Spellbound Entertainment ◆ **First review** PCG 163, 76

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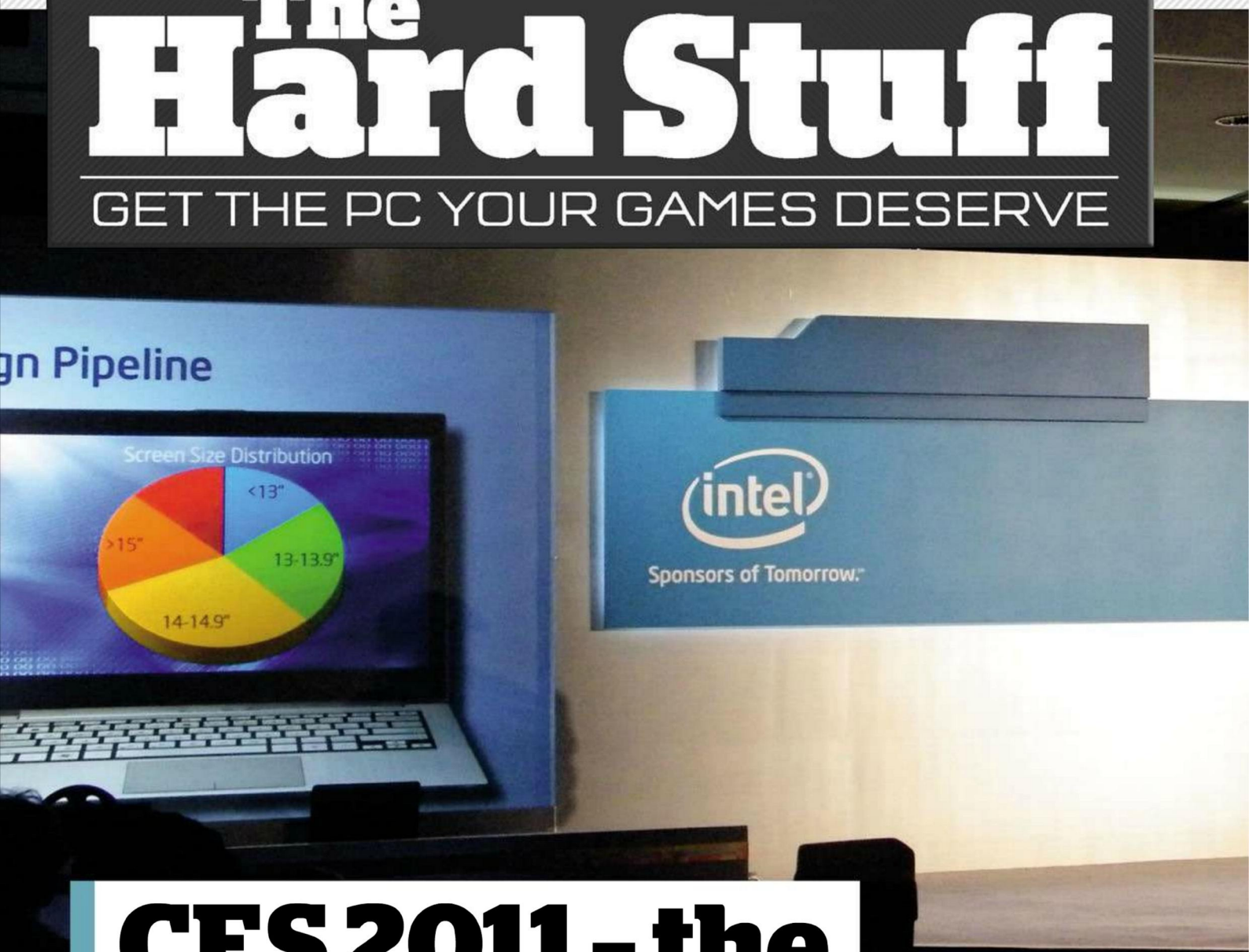
The Hard Stuff

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE



CES 2011 – the madness continues

THE BIG STORY The annual tech jamboree in Las Vegas showed off some interesting new kit. Here's the good, the bad and the Fiona

Judging by the kit shown at this year's Consumer Electronics Show, by the end of 2012 we'll all be using an Android-powered TV with a 55-inch screen lit by an OLED display matrix, gaming with a mechanical keyboard and enjoying Windows 8.

If Razer have their way, we'll also be using an outsized tablet to play *Elder Scrolls VI* on. By far the oddest and most controversial news of the show was when erstwhile peripherals designers Razer unveiled another prototype games machine, this time in the form of a ten-inch Windows 8-powered tablet that comes with giant gaming grips down either side. Billed as a tablet that can actually play high quality PC games and not just *Angry Birds*, the concept 'Project Fiona' device packs a Core i7 processor and can hook up to external peripherals via a USB dock.

I'm not sure it'll be replacing our laptops anytime soon, however. Speaking of which, Intel's ultrabook project stole the show for me. The company reckon they can get designs down to less than 18mm thick, with touch-sensitive removable screens.

With the graphics core of Intel's Ivy Bridge processors promising to be reasonably potent gaming chips, there's a chance that by the end of the year we'll see the one machine that can be used for everything from iPad-style web browsing to full-on PC gaming.

Despite some last minute rumours, neither Microsoft nor Sony showed off a new games console, and Sony went as far as saying PlayStation 4 won't be happening this year. But then why would we need them, when the outlook for gaming PCs is so good? ■

Adam Oxford

WorldMags.net

Intel's Mooly Eden talks Ultrabooks.

A BETTER BULLDOZER?

FX FIX MICROSOFT RELEASE PATCH THEN PULL IT

Is AMD's Bulldozer CPU its own worst enemy? Initial impressions haven't been great: clock for clock the performance is worse than some older Phenom II processors, but it turns out the problem could be the chip itself. Bulldozer – aka the AMD FX – is different to other CPUs out there in that pairs of processing cores share common resources. Last month, Microsoft released a Windows patch which was supposed to improve performance when it comes to scheduling tasks for these unusual cores. Two days later the patch was pulled as not ready yet. When it comes back, we'll see if it's the performance breakthrough AMD must surely be hoping for. **AO**

FUEL CELLS DUE THIS YEAR

HYDRO-POWER A HYDROGEN BATTERY IN YOUR POCKET?

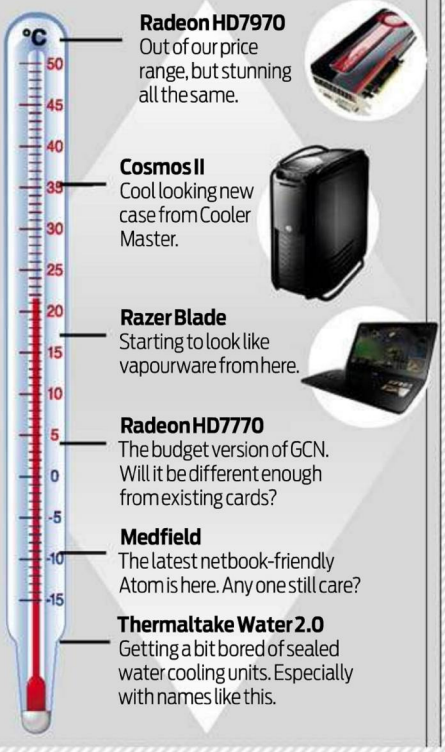
Swedish firm myFC revealed their Powertrekk portable fuel cell charger, for powering mobile devices, this time last year, but the company now reckon that a proper on-sale date is imminent. The Powertrekk works by generating hydrogen from a tablespoon of water, and was on show again at CES in January. myFC are confident that it will actually be available in shops by spring. Recent patent applications show Apple are considering something similar for their mobile devices too. **AO**

Project Fiona: powerful CPU, questionable controllers.

HP have clad their Spectre ultrabook in iPhone-4 like glass.

HOT PRODUCTS

MEASURING HARDWARE FEVER



Radeon HD7970
Out of our price range, but stunning all the same.

Cosmos II
Cool looking new case from Cooler Master.

Razer Blade
Starting to look like vapourware from here.

Radeon HD7770
The budget version of GCN. Will it be different enough from existing cards?

Medfield
The latest netbook-friendly Atom is here. Any one still care?

Thermaltake Water 2.0
Getting a bit bored of sealed water cooling units. Especially with names like this.

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Mechanical works

They're expensive, and loud enough to drown out your TV – so why are mechanical keyboards so popular, and is it time you got one?

One of the very few keyboards I've ever genuinely looked forward to and – I'll admit it – been excited about, is reviewed on page 130 this month. While Corsair's slimline K60 couldn't possibly live up to my high expectations for it, it does come close. It also presents an opportunity to discuss one of the more arcane aspects of PC gaming hardware: keyboard construction. Specifically, is a mechanical keyboard really best?

Most people may never knowingly have used a mechanical keyboard, or at least be blissfully unaware of what one is. Sadly, they aren't quite as thrilling as the name suggests: 'mechanical' conjures up some sort of typewriter-like apparatus under the buttons which uses levers and pistons. The truth is rather more prosaic, but still fascinating.

Most keyboards (non-mechanical ones) start off as a circuitboard covered with wires, with small gaps under each key location. Over this is placed a rubber or plastic membrane with small domes to cover those gaps, and inside the dome is a small steel ring or graphite layer. The key caps – the cubes of plastic with letters on – push the dome onto the PCB creating a circuit.

Because there are few moving parts, non-mechanical keyboards are cheap to manufacture, and despite the myths some can be quite good, lasting between five and ten million activations for each key. Many feel spongy and unresponsive, but not all. It's down to the design of the key caps and the mechanisms that hold them up.

The problem is that they can be unreliable. Contacts can stick into place, domes wear out and when one goes, the whole thing is written off. Plus, keys rely on the elasticity of the domes to bounce back into place after being hit, something which inevitably becomes sluggish over time.

On a mechanical keyboard, however, each key is spring mounted and operates a proper mechanical switch wired to a separate PCB. At the very least, this means that if one key breaks or sticks, it can theoretically be replaced. Because mechanical keyboards are relatively expensive to manufacture – there are a lot of moving parts for each key – they tend to be designed for scenarios where they'll be used a lot, such as shop tills, data entry terminals or at air traffic control desks. As a result, they are generally manufactured to high standards and last much longer than dome-type alternatives.

There are many different types of mechanical keyboard available, but as far as gaming goes you'll be hard pressed to find one that doesn't use German manufacturer Cherry's range of MX switches. Cherry make several different types of mechanical switch, colloquially identified by the colour of the key cap mount. If you have a mechanical keyboard at home, the chances are that it uses Cherry MX Black, MX Brown or MX Blue switches. Rarer are keyboards which use the more expensive (and desirable) MX Red or MX Clear switches, but you can find them: the Corsair K60 and K90 are examples of such.

Cherry MX keys all share a similar design (see boxout). Critically for gaming, they have a much lighter action to most domed keyboards, which feels the same all the way through the distance of travel. They're built to a high standard so feel tough under your fingers, and the point of activation is only about halfway down the total travel distance of each key, so they require less force to push down before they register a press.

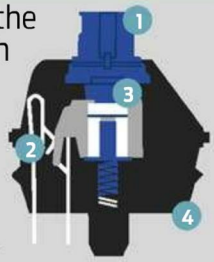
Are they worth it? Certainly they should outlast most other components if looked after and kept clean. I prefer an ergonomic keyboard for typing (mechanical ergonomic keyboards are hard to find), but for gaming I'd say once you've tried one, you'll never go back. And with prices starting around £60, they aren't prohibitively expensive either.

Be warned, though. Even 'non-tactile' mechanical switches (like MX Reds or MX Blacks), which don't audibly click when depressed, are louder than any domed competitor due to the hard parts bashing together and echoing around the case. If you're gaming in a shared space or when others are sleeping, you may want to keep a cheaper keyboard to hand, just to be polite. ■

Adam Oxford

HOW A CHERRY MX SWITCH WORKS

What's inside the MX Blue switch



1. Key cap
The keyboard manufacturer provides this, along with any funky back lighting they want to add.

2. Switch
The actual switch is mounted on the side of the key to prevent direct contact and thus last longer. In some MX types (including this one) there's a ridge which clicks into place when contact is made, creating a distinctive sound and feel. Others, like the MX Red or MX Black, move smoothly all the way down.

3. Mount
The cross shaped piece of plastic which supports the key cap is coloured to denote the type. This is mounted on a spring inside the switch unit.

4. Long life
Cherry MX keys are rated for 50 million or more activations. So you could type out the entire King James Bible (3.1 million letters) on a Cherry keyboard over 400 times. As long as you didn't spill coffee on it.

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What's next? This is.

What is Graphics Core Next?

AMD launch the Radeon HD7000 with a brand new internal architecture. Is it time to upgrade to Graphics Core Next?

Just before Christmas AMD sprang a surprise on us all: they brought forward the release of their latest high-end graphics card, the Radeon HD7970, from early 2012 to the tail end of 2011 with just a few days' notice.

It's a shame, because this should have been a carefully orchestrated event, heralding as it did one of the biggest changes to AMD's GPU lineup for many years. The HD7000 series is a complete break from the past: a brand new architecture with a completely reworked internal design. It was so much more than the usual and often humdrum new launches, yet the news was in danger of being buried as potential customers clocked off early for the pub.

If you were still coherent and paying attention, however, you might already know that the HD7970 is based on AMD's 'Tahiti' processor, a 'Southern Islands' chip designed using the 'Graphics Core Next' (GCN) architecture on a 28nm process. All of which underlines the fact that trying to stay abreast of changes in the world of graphics cards can feel like you're learning a new codename, product number or manufacturing technique every day. AMD alone released at least 42 new desktop, mobile and professional graphics cards in 2011, with an untold number of variations on each theme from its manufacturing partners.

"The HD7000 series is so much more than the usual humdrum new launches"

Despite the frantic launch schedule, big changes to GPU architecture don't come around that often. But the GCN part of HD7970 is very important. The basic design of a Radeon or GeForce card hasn't changed fundamentally since the first DirectX10 compatible chips in 2007 and 2006. Yes, there have been refinements, process shrinks and a more than sixfold increase in the number of transistors from 700 million for the HD2900XT to over 4.3 billion for the HD7970, but the underlying design principles are more or less the same (discounting the expensive and ultimately discarded ring bus memory, that is).

Adam says
For gaming purposes what you need to know is that HD7970 is the fastest single GPU now, and the design is futureproof. I'm expecting it to increase its lead as developers learn to use GCN and the drivers become more refined.

The last big change to Radeon cards was to incorporate the unified shader technology required by DirectX 10. Historically, graphics cards were highly specialised and streamlined processors split into pipelines capable of nothing but handling 3D calculations. From DX10 on, they're more of an amorphous network of hundreds of independent cells capable of handling any calculation where the same instruction is repeated many times across a large data set – or 'parallel

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processing' (carrying out the same process simultaneously in parallel).

Whether that's working out a certain lighting effect for every pixel on a HD screen, the way gravity and wind affect a piece of cloth, encoding video or analysing stock price movements in millisecond increments, graphics cards are exceptional parallel calculators in a way standard CPUs can never be.

AMD's approach to unified shaders up to and including the HD6000 series involved using 'very long instruction words', or VLIWs. The basic unit inside a Radeon DX10 or 11 chip contains four individual math processors, which are fed by grouping several small instructions up into one VLIW that's fired off to all four cores simultaneously. They're unified in that they can undertake any shader activity, but they're most efficient when working on four similar calculations at once – like the red, green, blue and alpha channel calculations for each pixel in a 3D scene. A fifth unit for special function maths was removed in the HD6xxx revision, and its duties spread over three of the other four cores.

Life's a batch

Unfortunately for AMD, outside of graphics calculations (working on object physics, for example) it's rather less usual to find batches of four or five equal length instructions that can be grouped together conveniently into one VLIW – and harder to do so anyway. Enter Southern Islands and GCN, which departs from this model. The internal design more closely resembles the one that Nvidia have used for DX10 and 11. It's clustered into batches of 16 simple cores which function as SIMD (single instruction, multiple data) processors which have a very high degree of autonomy within the structure of the rest of the chip. The principle is the same – lots of similar calculations on large datasets – but the technique introduces parallelism higher up the processing chain, so that more of the chip is in use more of the time. Conceptually it's a very subtle difference: architecturally it's completely different.

As a result, GCN has to do more work on the chip itself in terms of scheduling instructions, so it's larger, more complex and more expensive to build. It's a shift from AMD's previous strategy of saving their dual chip cards to compete with Nvidia's fastest single GPU boards.

The upside is that it's theoretically easier to write code for, can handle branching and conditional operations much more efficiently than VLIW hardware, and can work closer to its maximum throughput for more of the time. Early benchmarks give the HD7970 a 15-30% lead over Nvidia's best, although you'll pay up to £100 more for that advantage.

Most of these benefits won't be felt by gamers. A £100 card already does a respectable job at 1920x1080 these days, and not that many people play on multiple screens or 30" panels yet. The weak spot of AMD's older architecture was general purpose computing, not rendering *Crysis 2* in 3D. However, some extra features have been included just for us.

First up is support for what AMD calls 'partially resident textures'. This is very similar to id Software's megatexturing technique in the id Tech 4 engine, which allows artists to create large textures but only load the bit that's being used into memory. This saves on memory bandwidth, and also means that textures can be more detailed, since the pressure isn't on to make an entire texture very small. Will PRTs get used though? AMD supported tessellation on its cards for many years before it became a standard coding technique.

It's also the first card which is designed for DirectX 11.1, the 2012 revision to Microsoft's graphics API. No big new features are coming in DX11.1, mind, other than an attempt to standardise stereo 3D rendering techniques. It's very much a collection of small changes which improve the efficiency of the graphics pipeline for developers.

The HD7970 also supports PCI Express 3.0. Not such a big deal now, as only X79 motherboards have PCI-E 3.0 ports, but possibly useful for Crossfire in the future. There are also tweaks to Eyefinity to cover stereo 3D across multiple screens and better bezel compensation.

One more interesting and overlooked feature is that it's designed to be straightforward to overclock and can be fitted with a back up BIOS chip, encouraging hackers to flash the firmware without fear of damage.

My personal favourite feature of the HD7970 – aside from the out and out processing power – is the power saving technology inherited from AMD's CPU range. They're calling this ZeroCore for the HD7000 range, and it basically introduces power gates onto each of the shader cores that allow the GPU to switch them off when they're not in use. That drops the idle power consumption to almost nothing, something that laptops will benefit from hugely. As well as the overall savings, it could mean that a hybrid CPU/GPU wouldn't need a discrete card to make a decent games machine – you could run a battery saving mode and a games performance mode off the same GPU die.

Graphics Core Next also gets the PowerTune feature from HD6900 series cards, which gives you control over the clock and voltage speed for over and under volting by letting you set the maximum TDP of the card. Running a particularly intensive 3D app? You can increase PowerTune by a few percent to let your card automatically overclock itself.

As it stands, GCN is impressive if a little bit on the expensive side for the time being. Fortunately the HD7770 and HD7750 should be out at a more reasonable price by the time you read this, and we'll be rounding up all the latest cards next issue. ■

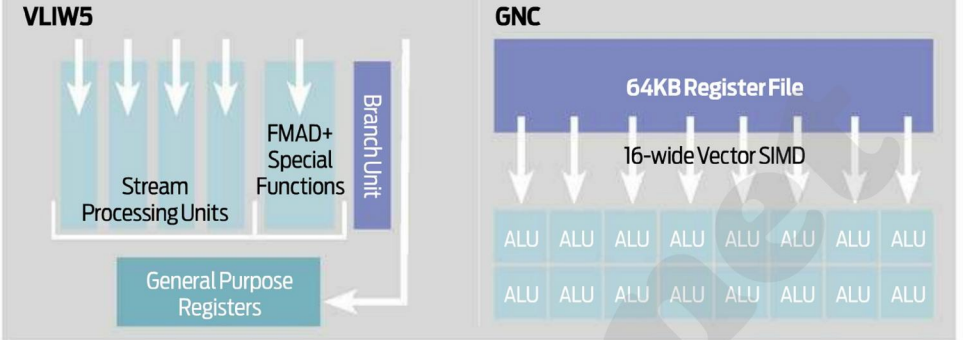
Adam Oxford

INSIDE GRAPHICS CORE NEXT

AMD's newest range of cards look very different under the skin

VLIW architecture
Cards from the HD 2xxx series to the HD6xxxs use VLIW to compound instructions together into groups of calculations sent simultaneously to four shader cores for processing.

GCN architecture
Graphics Core Next cards, from HD7xxx on, send one instruction to be carried out on every core in a large SIMD array of simple processors.



RADEON HD7970 TECH SPECS

Price
£430-£500

Shader cores
2048

GPU speed
925MHz

Memory
3GB

Memory bandwidth
384bit

Memory speed
5.5GHz (equivalent)

Texture units
128

ROPS
32

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BUYER'S ADVICE

CASES

What to look for when buying a new PC enclosure – and how much you should pay for it. ***By Adam Oxford***

DICTIONARY

XL-ATX> The newest ATX variant is for especially large motherboards with ten PCI slots. Mainly designed for server use, they're also handy (with a compatible case) if you're planning a four card graphics setup.

5.25"/3.5"/2.5"> The three standard sizes for internal drives. Optical drives are always the larger 5.25" design, while hard drives are usually 3.5". Some cases now have fittings for laptop drives (2.5") since that's the size of a common SSD.

Hard drive cage> These are not as common as they once were, but once many cases used to have a removable cage into which to mount the hard drives before fixing it back inside the case. Individual trays are now more common and slightly easier to fit.

SECC> Steel, Electroplated, Cold rolled, Coil. The most common material used in case design. Some manufacturers use more expensive aluminium, as it's lighter and can form part of a clever heat dissipation design.

Why would you want to replace a perfectly serviceable PC case? After all, it's not like the coffee stains or the fact that the side doors don't shut properly really affects performance, is it? Surely reusing what you already have and just twiddling with the components inside is a better idea?

Actually, as well as looking a bit dilapidated your old PC case can probably be improved upon in a number of ways. A new case might be bigger, for those enormous modern graphics cards, or quieter with better airflow. Or maybe you just want to build a smaller system that takes up less space in your flat.

What should I look for in a case?

These days, it's mostly down to personal taste. As PC parts are all standardised in terms of size and shape, physically any case from the last twenty years or so should be able to fit modern components. The ATX spec dictates the actual size – a case designed for smaller micro-ATX motherboards won't take full length ones – but other than that everything should go together well. Just look out for extra clearance width-wise if you want to use a large CPU cooler, or a bit of extra length if you're planning on fitting a large graphics card.

So technically there are no differences?

Of course there are, but even the cheapest cases now have some of the most important features, such as clear airflow directed from front to back for the best cooling. Most will also have a modern cable management system, which means holes cut into the motherboard mounting plate so you can feed cables behind the main tray and prevent them from obstructing air.

What about noise?

The perennial PC problem. From a CPU's point of view, lots of fans which draw air in from the front of the case and over the hard drives then vent it out the back are a good thing, along with extra fans on the top and sides. From your neighbour's perspective, large fans which spin slowly and quietly are a good thing, especially if there's a manual controller to slow them into silence.

What about fittings?

Even if you're planning to leave the innards of your PC alone once they're fitted, having plenty of space inside to work is a good thing. Not only does it mean easier construction, it's better for circulating air too. Other features to look out for are toolless fittings, which ensure that such things as hard drives can be slotted into place without the aid of a screwdriver.

Anything else?

Nearly every case now has a front panel fitted with forward facing USB ports for quickly plugging in memory sticks, and usually audio jacks for headphones too. But make sure any new case you buy supports USB 3.0 for the front panel or you could still end up having to get round the back regularly if you use an external hard drive.

What should I do with the old one?

Build another PC in it? Failing that, unlike most PC components, cases have a large number of easily reclaimable materials inside (and outside for that matter), and not many of the hazardous substances that plague older PCBs. Most household recycling centres should be more than happy to take one off your hands. ■

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GROUP TEST

CASES

Updating your PC or building from scratch? Here are seven top chassis to house it in. ***By Adam Oxford***

HOW WE TESTED

Design > We're looking for thoughtful, well engineered cases. There has to be plenty of room to work inside, but they should look good too. Clever cable tidies are mandatory, easily removed dust filters count.

Cooling > To test each case, the current PC Gamer Rig was assembled inside it and turned on, then left running a standard stress test application for ten minutes. Motherboard sensors were used to report back the ambient temperature in the case.

Airflow > After that, extra long components were put in to test (a) how easy they were to fit and (b) how they affected airflow and potential overclocking.

Noise > With the newly built Rig stashed under a desk, a decibel monitor was held at head height to compare each system. Without anything running, the ambient room noise was 28dBa.

Carbide 500R

£75 Corsair

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

There are three very strong competitors here for a 'favourite case under £80' award. The Bitfenix Raider, the Cooler Master Plus 912 HAF and this, Corsair's Carbide 500R. The other two are both, in their own way, very good cases bordering on excellent. But even against the higher cost cases elsewhere in this round up, the Carbide is the overall winner.

And it's not just because it looks great, although with its white finish and demurely lit fans, it really is in a class of its own here. Only the soft Bitfenix comes close – but that's not why the Carbide is the winner.

"Even with the drive bays in place there's an enormous amount of room to play with"

It's also not just because the Carbide is very quiet – although it is. The fans are linked to a three-way switch on the front panel which allows you to increase their speed, but for general use (ie, not mad overclocking) it's hard to think if a scenario when you'd want to. Despite the fact that they're two of the smallest cases in the test, for a standard system like the PC Gamer Rig the Carbide and the Cooler Master HAF run the coolest of the lot – something that's down to the laws of small spaces and higher air pressure, no doubt.

In fact, the only slight problem with the whole case is that the noise the four fitted fans do make is rather lower pitched than some. That means that although technically it's quieter than most in terms of plain decibels, it's got a slightly hollow ring that draws attention to itself.

That's more than compensated for by the fact that the 500R is deceptively big. Like the other two smaller cases, you can remove the top hard drive cage to make way for elongated graphics, but that's an option in every sense of the word with the Carbide. Even with the drive bays in place there's an enormous amount of room to play around with, and they only actually need to come out for one of those ridiculous two-chip cards like the GTX 590.

Inside it's strikingly similar – although more roomy – to the Bitfenix. Cables are tidied away behind the motherboard, and the holes have seals to hold stray wires neatly in place. All the drive bays are toolless, and although points are lost for not including dedicated 2.5" slots or an adaptor, they're won back again by such details as the screw tray and door bolts that stay on the door so they don't get lost. I even like the fact that the rubber feet are part of the chassis rather than removable – I've torn many off in freak office moving accidents in the past.

It's not big and it's not obnoxious – those who want a machine that shouts 'I am a gaming PC' will need to look elsewhere. But if you're after a case that's as tasteful as it is accomodating to high-end systems, with cooling power for moderate tuning, here it is. ■

VERDICT

Simple looking but exceptionally well designed inside and out. Unplug the door fan for truly tranquil gaming.

PC GAMER **93**

Spec ◆ **Type** Mid tower ◆ **Slots** 8 ◆ **5.4" drives** 6 ◆ **3.4" drives** 6 ◆ **Front panel connectors** 2xUSB3.0, 1xFirewire, Audio ◆ **Intake fans** 2x120mm ◆ **Outlet fans** 1x120mm ◆ **Other** 1x200mm Door ◆ **Dust filters** Yes ◆ **Dimensions** 521x508x208mm

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Raven 3

£130 Silverstone

One of the defining features of Silverstone's Fortress and Raven ranges is the unusual position of the motherboard. Rather than setting it so that the ports point out the back, Silverstone rotate the whole thing through 90 degrees. Thus, Silverstone argue, you can get at the important bits like USB ports and DVI connectors without having to root around the back of your PC.

It's a genius idea, but after playing around with the Raven 3 for a bit it soon becomes apparent why no one else has followed Silverstone's outre design. For a start, it means cold air has to be sucked in from the bottom of the case, from the dusty floor (following the usual airflow pattern, nothing would catch a draught from front to back after the first graphics card). Then there's the large, plasticky cover which is used to hid all those cables. It looks OK, but is far from as attractive as a well crafted metal lid and cumbersome to remove if you want to get at those ports.

The vertical design also leaves the hard drives without direct cooling, even if they are mounted in all sorts of odd places. There's an enormous number of sensible 5.4" drives in the proper place by the front of the case, but there are only four dedicated 3.5" bays, which are mounted on the back of the motherboard plate. You can fit adaptors to the larger bays for smaller drives, but this almost seems different for difference's sake.

The worse workaround to accommodate the motherboard shift is an ungainly power cord extension to get around the fact that the PSU is mounted under the hard drives, and doesn't face outwards. I'm sure it's technically safe, but I couldn't shake an uneasy feeling about using it without opening the door to check it was OK.

For all of this seemingly deliberate abstruseness, I love the Raven 3, and not just because I appreciate bloodymindedness. I like the fact that it's trying to be different, and things that work – like the magnetised dust filters that just pull off for cleaning – are brilliant. Most importantly, there's tons of room inside and it's as close to silent as you get.

I wouldn't recommend it to all, mainly because it's a pain to assemble and I wouldn't put that PSU lead in the wrong hands. Plus, the standard cooling isn't great. But if you don't mind working for your reward and can put up with the plastic lid, it's not just unusual, it's brilliant. ■

VERDICT

Flawed genius in every sense, but if you can live with its several ideosyncracies, vive la difference and all that.

PC GAMER **82**

Spec ◆ **Type** Mid tower (Extended ATX) ◆ **Slots** 8 ◆ **5.4" drives** 7 ◆ **3.4" drives** 4 (+4x2.5") ◆ **Front panel connectors** 2xUSB3.0, Audio ◆ **Intake fans** 2x180mm ◆ **Outlet fans** 1x120mm ◆ **Other** None ◆ **Dust filters** Magnetic ◆ **Dimensions** 570x522x235mm

Overseer RX-I

£110 Thermaltake

The spiky looks aren't at all unpleasant if you like that sort of thing, and it's by no means the most garish of cases ever to pass through the PC Gamer labs. Indeed, compared to the rather staid looks of the similarly sized Antec Eleven Hundred, I prefer the slightly warmer feel of the Overseer. Even if it does look like it's trying to be a prop in the next Aliens film.

The Antec is the best point of reference in other ways too. Internally, the two cases are very similar. There's lots of space for oversized graphics cards and water piping, or extra fans if you want to include them for overclocking. Hard drives slot into place with a simple toolless bracket to jacket them in, and rubber seals around all the cable tidy holes make for a smart appearance.

One innovative feature on the Overseer is that there's a full SATA bay mounted externally on the top of the case. Just drop a hot swappable drive in and you've got a full speed internal drive mounted as a portable. I'm not convinced you'll use it much, but it's there on the 'nice to have list', just behind the proper USB 3.0 ports built into the front panel.

Because that's the level of the Overseer's innovation, rather than the bonkers but adorable over the top Raven 3, it's almost the winner of this round-up. It's held back only by an issue with the cooling. Surprisingly, even though it has two large intake fans and one biggish exhaust, the cooling is not as effective at default settings as other cases. It is, however, very quiet and you can ramp up the fan speed so long as you don't mind a bit of extra noise. Even when it's spun up to max, the large blue LED fan on the front of the Overseer is quieter than the Eleven Hundred.

Then there's the build quality. All that jagged trim is plastic, and the power switch fell off just removing the case from its transport box.

That shouldn't happen, not at this price certainly.

Even with that, it's a case I'd recommend to friends, especially the 15-year-old ones who'll be taken by the styling. Great if that's what you want from a games PC, but if you want something a little more refined you can find it. ■

VERDICT

Big and intimidating if you like that sort of thing, with just a few build quality issues for the price.

PC GAMER **79**

Spec ◆ **Type** Full tower ◆ **Slots** 8 ◆ **5.4" drives** 3 ◆ **3.4" drives** 6 (+1x2.5") ◆ **Front panel connectors** 2xUSB2.0, 2xUSB3.0, eSATA, HDD Dock, Audio ◆ **Intake fans** 1x200mm ◆ **Outlet fans** 1x120mm ◆ **Other** 1x200mm (top) ◆ **Dust filters** No ◆ **Dimensions** 580x535x220mm

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Raider

£74 Bitfenix

You could be forgiven for not being totally au fait with the name Bitfenix. They've only been selling cases in the UK for a couple of years now, and are hardly a household brand. Yet if I wasn't too old to start having a crush, the lead designer for the company would be watching out for a scented Valentine around about now.

What Bitfenix have managed across their range is to combine a functional simplicity with a grown-up look that's both adult and fun. Partly, this is down to the soft, rubberised edges that have become Bitfenix's trademark look, but mostly it's just down to getting things right.

The Raider is a small and unassuming case, which has enough room inside for a full sized ATX board and all the peripherals it needs. You could get a maximum length graphics card in there, but you'll lose a block of three hard drive bays to do so, which can be easily removed for more space. If you aren't planning to use a lot of drives, you might want to take it out anyway – even GTX 560s get perilously close to the walls of the hard drive cage.

Despite the fact that this is a relatively cheap case it's got all the high-end features you could wish for. Things like a variable speed fan controller – something that is missing from cases costing twice as much – and front facing USB 3.0 ports that attach to motherboard headers rather than cabling outside the case to rear facing ports.

There's even the funny little seals around the cable tidies that are very much en vogue right now, even though they do little other than add a bit of aesthetic appeal.

The cooling is good, but the cramped space does count against it. If you're planning a high powered build with space for overclocking, the Raider is not for you. For PCs with a less ambitious but more practical aim, it's a well built, good priced, compact case that looks great and is very quiet. Almost, but not quite, perfect. ■

VERDICT

A lovely looking case. If the Carbide 500R didn't exist, this would be the winner. But it does so it doesn't.

PC GAMER **88**

Spec ◆ **Type** Mid tower ◆ **Slots** 7 ◆ **5.4" drives** 4 ◆ **3.4" drives** 6 ◆ **Front panel connectors** 4x USB 3.0, Audio ◆ **Intake fans** 2x120mm ◆ **Outlet fans** 1x120mm ◆ **Other** None ◆ **Dust filters** Yes, external ◆ **Dimensions** 500x493x210mm

Plus 912 HAF

£53 Cooler Master

The former cladding of the PC Gamer Rig is getting on a bit (it was originally released in 2010) but it still stands tall against more modern enclosures – or at least as tall as a mid-tower gets. Indeed, with such features as a decent cable management system and dedicated 2.5" drive bays, it has some essentials which others of a newer design lack.

Plus, as it's available for only just over £50, it's an absolute bargain.

There are a few compromises you have to make: it won't take motherboards with more than six expansion ports and you'll struggle to get the longest graphics cards into the case. One of the hard drive bays rotates but for what there is it doesn't feel too cramped inside. You also don't get a USB 3.0 connector for the front panel.

The cooling, however, is excellent thanks to a 200mm red LED-lit fan on the front of the chassis. It's a little noisy on its default setting, and there's no built-in controller, but you can easily attach both front and back fans to motherboard headers so that they can be throttled via the BIOS. That can make the whole thing one of the quietest in this test. The only real problem is that there are no dust filters on the intake fan, which could be messy after a few months.

If you're planning on fitting large graphics cards, or even multiple ones, you'll probably want something a bit bigger with a bit more flair. Indeed, even the Rig has since moved on to the Carbide 500R now, because that's well worth the £20 extra. But for a no-nonense games PC that looks the part without sounding it, the 912 HAF is still my favourite super-budget case and a good choice for a really parsimonious build. ■

VERDICT

Still a great case, absurdly cheap and hardly showing its age at all, but the youthful Carbide has it beat.

PC GAMER **84**

Spec ◆ **Type** Mid-tower (ATX) ◆ **Slots** 7 ◆ **5.4" drives** 4 ◆ **3.4" drives** 6 (+2x2.5") ◆ **Front panel connectors** 2xUSB 2.0, Audio, eSATA ◆ **Intake fans** 1x200mm ◆ **Outlet fans** 1x200mm ◆ **Other** None ◆ **Dust filters** No ◆ **Dimensions** 496x430x230mm

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T9

£50 Sharkoon

According to one supplier who spoke to me, this is a very popular case. Most of the attraction – I assume – is the £50 price. The unusual green paint on the motherboard tray is all very interesting, but you can't actually see it once the components are fitted.

It's certainly a good example of how to get high quality on a tight budget. It's well built, if unexciting, and not too noisy either. The fans are audible, but providing you've got enough motherboard headers for both the intake fans, you can reduce the sound they make considerably by throttling them in the BIOS.

The small size might account for some of its popularity too. It can still take a regular ATX motherboard, although there's not enough for a full length board or any removable drive cages to expand one into. There's not much room for working inside, either, and the drives are all mounted in the old fashioned manner, facing the motherboard, rather than the door.

As a result of the cramped internals, airflow suffers, and the motherboard temperature was one of the highest under load.

As well presented as it is for a budget case, I'd choose the Cooler Master over this. Unless you're planning on fitting a big GPU like the GeForce GTX 580 or similar, that's the better option. ■

PC GAMER 81

Spec ◆ **Type** Mid tower ◆ **Slots** 7 ◆ **5.4" drives** 9 ◆ **3.4" drives** Via brackets ◆ **Front panel connectors** 1xUSB3.0, 2xUSB2.0, Audio ◆ **Intake fans** 2x120mm ◆ **Outlet fans** 1x120mm ◆ **Other** None ◆ **Dust filters** No ◆ **Dimensions** 475x440x200mm

Eleven Hundred

£110 Antec

Huge inside, this is capable of taking all but the very biggest motherboards. It's one of the few cases with dedicated toolless mounts for SSD drives, and the rubber seals over all cable tidy holes keep it smart inside too.

Few fans are fitted as standard, and while this is offset by the very big bladed cooler on top, I'd rather have had a front fitted one than the odd space for an optional blower behind the motherboard. Also, the door height only just has enough clearance for a large CPU cooler, so forget about mounting extra cooling there.

The real problem is outside. The plain steel chassis is functional, but old fashioned looking. You get USB 3.0 front ports, but little else. The variable speed fan controller sits awkwardly round the back, and fell off in transit anyway, leaving the fans locked onto a medium setting. Which is very loud.

As a result, it at least kept the motherboard cool despite my misgivings. It's huge and capable of housing the most complex multi-graphics setups, but if you don't need that space there are more interesting cases available for less. ■

PC GAMER 82

Spec ◆ **Type** Full tower ◆ **Slots** 9 ◆ **5.4" drives** 3 ◆ **3.4" drives** 6 (+2x2.5") ◆ **Front panel connectors** Audio, 2xUSB 2.0, 2xUSB 3.0 ◆ **Intake fans** None ◆ **Outlet fans** 1x120mm ◆ **Other** 1x200mm (top) ◆ **Dust filters** Front and base ◆ **Dimensions** 527x546x237mm

BENCHMARKS

CASES COMPARED FOR NOISE AND COOLING

A good case should retain noise and expel heat – not the other way around. Here's how our test cases measured up against each other.

Noise

Temperature

SILVERSTONE RAVEN 3

Noise: 29dBa

Temperature: 39C

THERMALTAKE OVERSEER RX-I

Noise: 29dBa

Temperature: 39C

BITFENIX RAIDER

Noise: 32dBa

Temperature: 38C

CORSAIR CARBIDE 500R

Noise: 30dBa

Temperature: 35C

COOLER MASTER PLUS 912 HAF

Noise: 32dBa

Temperature: 32C

SHARKOON T9

Noise: 34dBa

Temperature: 38C

ANTEC ELEVEN HUNDRED

Noise: 38dBa

Temperature: 34C

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ON TEST

REVIEW

The very best in PC gaming hardware, reviewed and rated. ***By Adam Oxford***

TESTING CRITERIA

Components and materials > A piece of kit is quite literally the sum of its parts. We look for the fastest chips, the highest core counts and the most modern materials.

Real-world performance> Each piece of kit we look at must be examined on its own merits. If it's a mouse, how does it feel? Is it too heavy or light? If it's a memory stick, an item designed for portability, how much data can it hold? Does it read and write data quickly?

Attractiveness> Some kit looks good, some looks bad. Aesthetics are often taken into account as, depending on the item, it can be a factor in your long-term satisfaction.

Value> It may be the highest-performing piece of kit in its category, but is it within reach of most consumers? We like to see components that are not only best-in-class, but offer value for money too.

Vengeance K60

£100 Corsair

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If ever there was a keyboard that looked like it meant business, it's the new Vengeance K60 from Corsair. The toughened, laser etched buttons seem to hover above the brushed aluminium plate that tops off the body, giving it the futuristic look of a device that's been pared down to the minimum you need for precision gaming.

There are no fancy backlights here, or additional macro buttons or indeed anything that could be construed as superfluous. It's as basic as you can imagine – even the drivers that allow you to change the polling rate have to be downloaded from an obscure link if you really want them (you won't).

"The keys have an exceptionally light action that lets your fingers fly over them"

The one additional feature is a set of media keys with a metal roller switch for volume controls – all of which have the kind of industrial feel that out-Apples Apple.

The keyboard itself deploys a set of Cherry's rarest and (arguably) best mechanical switches, the MX Reds. These non-tactile, linear keys have an exceptionally light action which lets your fingers fly over the keyboard fast. The metal base makes it very rigid too, and helps to absorb some of the key-crashing noise when you're bashing away.

Designed specifically for first-person shooters (a larger MMO board, the K90, is also available) it has a removable asymmetric wrist rest which opens up to reveal a set of contoured key cap replacements for the WASD and number keys, along with a tool for switching out the buttons for typing. It's great for gaming, but has to be taken off to type. There are two extra legs at the front of the keyboard too, which can extended to rake the whole thing away from you if you prefer a directional rake.

One of its more interesting features is that the K60 (and K90) allows up to 20 buttons to be depressed simultaneously before it'll start returning errors. Other than Microsoft's X4, most USB keyboards are usually limited to what's known as 'six key roll over', or 6KRO, and the anti-ghosting properties are often tuned to specific keys like WASD. Only keyboards with PS/2 connections can report unlimited presses across the whole board, but Corsair at least come close enough (20KRO over the whole board) for all practical purposes.

As highly anticipated as the K60 has been, however, it's not quite perfect. The top row of buttons – including the escape key – and the six buttons around insert and delete aren't mechanical, so they have a very different feel to the rest. What's more the larger keys – especially the spacebar, backspace and shift buttons – feel slightly spongy too. On some keyboards, like Razer's Black Widow, these are supported by larger springs to hold up the extra weight. Corsair add some mounts to keep the keys level, but which don't do anything to add some much needed bounce.

I'd say these are cost cutting measures, but at £100 it's more expensive than originally hoped for, too (although still less than the Mionix Z60). In almost every way it's one of the best keyboards ever, but it has just enough small flaws to make you think about something cheaper but more consistently rounded, like the Steelseries 6Gv2. ■

SPEC **Key type** Cherry MX Red ◆ **Connections** 2x USB 2.0 ◆ **Anti-ghosting** 20KRO ◆ **USB hub** One port ◆ **Extra key caps** 10

VERDICT

A wonderfully pared back, mean-looking keyboard, but the inconsistent feel of some keys holds it back.

PC GAMER 88

WorldMags.net

Momentous XT

£140 Seagate

Seagate's Momentous XT drives are one of the only currently available examples of a hybrid HD + SSD drive. The 2.5" package suggests that they're designed primarily for laptops, but with 7,200rpm platters they're more than capable of holding their own against full size desktop drives too.

Alongside the traditional spinning hard drive, there's a small SSD used for caching read operations: as with Intel's SRT technology, regularly used files get mirrored into the SSD for fast access. After a few runs the effect is, more or less, as if the whole drive is an SSD, since most of us usually only use a few programs on a regular basis.

This second generation XT is identical to its predecessors except that everything is larger. There's 750GB of storage in the main part of the drive, and an 8GB SSD as opposed to the 4GB in earlier XTs.

It's also, given the price of hard drives at the moment, not much more expensive than a standard 750GB drive. Which makes it a bargain, although that might change as prices for other drives fall.

The XT's weakness is that it doesn't cache write operations as well as reads. That means that overall, it doesn't come close to the performance of a dedicated SSD drive – although it will match it in certain scenarios. With unlimited funds, I'd still recommend using a separate 120GB SSD. ■

PC GAMER **86**

SPEC ◆ **Form factor** 2.5-inch ◆ **Storage** 750GB HDD + 8GB SSD ◆ **DRAM cache** 32MB ◆ **Interface** SATA 6Gbs ◆ **Spin speed** 7200rpm

Shagon AHC-118

£25 Auras

This is a versatile heatsink with fittings for all current AMD and Intel sockets, including the 2011 pin one required for a six core i7. It's also remarkably easy to fit for a relatively high-end cooler – the universal backplate and retainers leave plenty of room to get in and fasten the four retaining bolts with ease, and the low noise fan simply pushes onto rubber gromits designed to reduce vibration while in motion.

The whole noise damping array works well. A rough and ready reading with a decibel meter recorded an almost inaudible change in volume as the fan ramped up to a higher setting, and the whole thing is quieter than most of the coolers in last month's group test.

The design is basic and functional, but there's a splash of colour around the edges that works in a retro-style way. It's not exactly innovative, but it's not offensive either.

Six large heat pipes mount directly onto the CPU, and draw warmth away up into the large radiator tower. As far as efficiency goes, it kept a Core i7 3960X to 60C while working flat out. Again comparing it to last month's batch of coolers, that's a solid result. It's just pipped for performance and looks by last month's winner, the Thermolab Trinity, but since it matches that cooler for price, you can be confident in either choice. ■

PC GAMER **86**

SPEC ◆ **Socket support** 2011, 1366, 1155/6, 775, AM3+, AM3, AM2 ◆ **Materials** Aluminium and copper ◆ **Fan** 120mm ◆ **Grease supplied** Yes ◆ **Size** 180x118x135mm ◆ **Weight** 951g ◆ **Noise** 43dBA ◆ **Link** bit.ly/zl0jc0

KIT FILTER

Ultra SSD £125

The maths says that a typical SSD with load balancing and error correction firmware should last 50 years or so, but Sandisk reckons their drives have double the usual 'mean time before failure' (MTBF) of rivals. That should offer some peace of mind to the nervous upgrader, but the compromise is that the Ultra has a slower SATA 3Gbps interface than the best 6Gbps drives and the three year warranty is only as good as, say, Kingston's. It's good value for a 120GB drive, but I'd spend more for a quicker drive and make some backups.

78

www.sandisk.com

Revoltec SMD-15 £35

These LED-laden tubes are a simple way of retrofitting a backlight onto an otherwise dark screen. Stick them onto the back of your monitor, and they light up the wall behind with peripheral vision-filling light of varying colour. The only problem with this setup is that the colours have to be manually programmed or changed – they don't change contextually like amBX lights to reflect the on-screen colour, and require a separate control box and remote. You're better off with the white Halo6s from Antec (PCG 231).

73

www.revoltec.net

Storm Sirius £100

There's a control unit with a USB soundcard in the box, optional analogue connectors and a choice of felt or leatherette ear cuffs. It's a very comfortable headset with either. Each ear is host to four speakers for surround sound, but I've yet to find a headset which convinces me that surround effects aren't better simulated using really good, large stereo speakers rather than lots of tiny strategically placed ones. With its bass heavy performance and muddy high frequencies, the Sirius hasn't changed my mind.

68

www.coolermaster.co.uk

WorldMags.net

The PC Gamer Rig

Another new look for the perfect PC

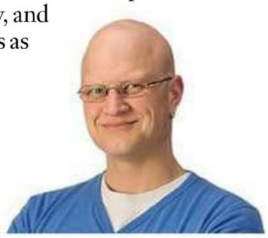
We've seen exciting new graphics cards and two big processor launches over the last few months, but the Rig remains stubbornly resilient to change. While Nvidia, AMD and Intel fight over who has the best performance, the Rig is all about best value – and very little has changed in the world of affordable components. That matters, because this is the PC we'd build given a budget of £1,000 and a mandate to create something capable of running any game you can throw at it on glorious high quality settings.

One thing has changed, however, and that's the physical appearance of the Rig. After cramming it all inside the Cooler Master HAF 912 last month, just a few days of playing around with Corsair's excellent Carbide 500R for this month's group test convinced me that it was worth taking it out and doing it all over again. The £25 extra it costs is money well spent.

For that £25 difference, you can upgrade from a good if slightly rudimentary case, to one that absolutely refuses to compromise in looks or capability, and will last you for years as well. Well worth it.

Adam

Adam Oxford
Hardware Editor



THE PC GAMER RIG

CPU — £155
Intel Core i5 2500K

An unlocked Sandy Bridge quad core, with everything but hyperthreading included.

FITTED November

3D CARD — £153
GeForce GTX 560Ti

A good low cost card that'll get you gaming at decent framerates on a single monitor.

FITTED January

MOTHERBOARD — £80
Gigabyte Z68AP-D3

An awesome Z68 board, with mSATA connectors for mini SSDs and Intel's caching technology.

FITTED November

POWER SUPPLY — £70
Cooler Master 80+

A decent 650W PSU that's rated well for efficiency. The minimum you should try to get away with.

FITTED November

RAM — £42
Crucial Ballistic Sport

Eight gigabytes of fast 1600MHz DDR3 for under £50. Grab it quick, just in case it's a misprint.

FITTED November

MONITOR — £142
LG IPS236V

Astonishingly low price for an IPS screen, and the LED backlight means it hardly takes up any space.

FITTED November

CASE — £75
Corsair Carbide 500R

An excellent case, quiet, classy and roomy. It's as good as many that cost twice the price or more.

FITTED March

KEYBOARD — £25
Microsoft SideWinder X4

Backlighting, macros and anti-ghosting all for a mere £25? That'll do nicely.

FITTED Christmas

HARD DRIVE — £39
Samsung Spinpoint F3 500GB

Hard drive prices are out of control. Get a small one now and upgrade later.

FITTED January

MOUSE — £30
Logitech G400

Classic Logitech style in a brand new design, this 3600dpi mouse is comfortable and precise.

FITTED November

DVD DRIVE — £17
LG GH22NP21

Fast DVD writers are pretty generic these days, and it's not really worth spending the extra for Blu-ray.

FITTED November

HEADSET — £34
Corsair HS1A

Good quality sound at a reasonable price. Easily one of the best sub-£50 headsets.

FITTED November

Total price £862

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NOW PLAYING

"Hang on, chaps – their wireless is unsecured!"

THE PC GAMER TEAM

CHRIS T

TOM S

TOM F

CHRIS D

"If I could reply, I'd say STOP BEING ON FIRE IT'S NOT HELPING"

STEPPING OUT OF THE SHADOWS IN **STAR WARS: THE OLD REPUBLIC**

Chris Thursten

Now Playing: *Star Wars: The Old Republic*
This month: Stopped looking at his phone and remembered what a blaster rifle does.
Also Played: *QUBE*

To be a healer in an MMO is to feel invisible, responsible, and a bit superior. When you're the only thing standing between a bunch of heavily armed clowns and a steep repair bill, it's easy to get the impression that you're the only person in the world with a real job.

As an Imperial Operative specialising in medicine, I rarely get involved directly in *TOR* group fights. I face the Empire's enemies through proxies, keeping my allies on their feet with an array of healing gadgets. If you're lucky I'll shoot you with a dart full of remedial kolto, but I'm just as likely to mutter into a communicator, calling down a droid to do the same thing. At best I look like I'm conducting the battle from the sidelines, and at worst like I'm on the phone.

Life as an agent means accepting that I'm never going to get a lightsaber or jetpack. What I'm enjoying about *TOR* is the way BioWare's narrative actually plays to this aspect of my character. Being an agent is about protecting the status quo from the shadows: mitigating the damage done by the enemies of the Empire, but preventing the Sith from plunging everything into chaos. I'm a healer on a galactic scale.

Occasionally, though, it's nice to take a more hands-on approach. On the city-planet Cademimu 5, a small strikeforce – myself, two Bounty Hunters, and a Sith Juggernaut – is attempting to manipulate a local coup d'etat to the Empire's advantage. We've fought our way through the streets, defeated the local security forces, and are closing in on the enemy general.

General Orto, apparently in a bid for 3643 BBY's Manliest Separatist Award, faces us in melee combat inside a missile silo. He periodically ignites one of the rockets above us, flooding a section of the arena with flame. It's pretty important that you're not under these engines when they fire. Helpfully, they glow shortly before igniting. Getting that pattern recognition right first time is crucial if we're going to survive.

> **"Their health bars are dropping rapidly, and they can't figure out why. They blame me."**

It's not something my friends seem overly concerned with. Before long, their health bars are dropping rapidly, and they can't figure out why. In hurriedly-typed messages, they blame me: my healing darts and droids aren't enough to keep their hitpoints from running dangerously low. I can't reply – I'm too busy burning through every ability at my disposal in order to keep them in the fight – but if I could reply, I'd say something like STOP BEING ON FIRE IT'S NOT HELPING.

READ ME
RELEASED December 2011
OUR REVIEW PCG 236, 93%
BUY IT Origin, £44.99
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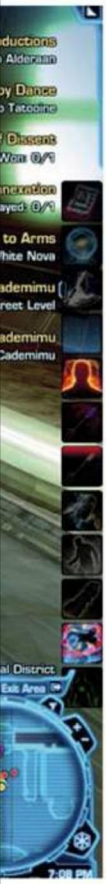
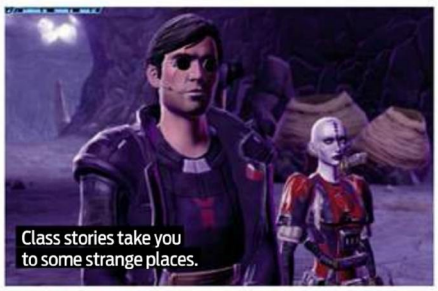


To be fair, it is her house.

Having a nice sit-down in the galaxy's only usable chair.


Class stories take you to some strange places.

Red numbers are never a good thing.

The third time a rocket ignites above the Juggernaut, there's nothing I can do as he is reduced to slag. One of the Bounty Hunters jetpacks in to avenge him, flinging himself into the column of flame like a vengeance-crazed moth. I keep him alive, but barely. The other Bounty Hunter is circle-strafing around the arena, firing off volleys from his twin blasters. He crosses the section I'm in as three of the engines fire up. He's dead before he gets half way around.

There are two of us left, which at least gives me time to issue instructions. "Watch the ceiling and run when it changes", I say. Another three engines light up, forcing me to move, but the remaining Bounty Hunter is safe. Then he starts to run, jogging toward me with the boss in tow. He's got it the wrong way around, and he's headed straight into the next blast. I reach safety, he dies in a fire.

The general turns on his heel and begins to charge. Group chat is filled with talk of a restart. I drop to one knee and activate my shields. I line up a high-damage sniper shot, wait as it charges to full power, and fire. Orto falls in a single critical hit and drops two pieces of Operative equipment. "Looks like someone needs medical attention," I quip, out loud, to no one in particular.

"I kicked him in the balls until all his armour fell off"

KICKING BACK IN **ASSASSIN'S CREED: BROTHERHOOD**

Tom Senior

Now Playing: *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*
This month: Liberated Rome with the help of some steel toecaps.
Also played: *Mass Effect*

Your task in *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* is to overthrow the oppressive Borgia forces tyrannising Rome. As master assassin, Ezio Auditore, you must kill key members of their inner circle to tear them apart from the inside.

To reach those senior members, you have to exploit the Borgia fondness for public appearances and wild parties in which everyone conveniently wears disguise. However, I discovered very early on that the Borgia have a much more pronounced weakness: their balls.

There's an unfortunate exploit in *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*. The time it takes for an opponent to recover from a swift kick to the balls is *just* longer than the time it takes Ezio to deliver another swift kick to the balls. The results of this discovery would prove devastating for the Borgia forces. Never have so many men's balls been kicked in the name of freedom.

I built an army of assassins, liberating fresh recruits from Borgia attacks with my new-found skill. Every time I did so, they praised my combat mastery and pledged their lives to my cause.

Even the plate armour of the toughest enemies in the game could do nothing against the horrors of an angry Ezio delivering a Cossack dance to their crotch. Eventually, I reached *Brotherhood*'s final boss. I kicked him in the balls until all his armour fell off, and then left it to the cutscene to deliver the final blow.

I couldn't shake the feeling that I had cheated my way to victory, and certainly the ball-kicking button on my keyboard was in a sad state. But, I had also saved Rome in the cheesiest way possible. On balance, it was totally worth it.

READ ME
RELEASED March 2011
OUR REVIEW PCG 226, 86%
BUY IT £30
MORE bit.ly/9FSlwq

I kicked it and it exploded.

WorldMags.net

For wolves, they look uncannily like they want you to take them to play in the park.

"The first time I fight a dragon, I hide in the tower, casting Courage"

TOM TRIES TO SURVIVE **SKYRIM** WITH ILLUSION ALONE

Tom Francis

Now Playing: *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*
This month: Gave courage to people who should probably have run away.
Also Played: *FTL*

I hate Illusion magic in *Skyrim*. Its mind-control spells only work on enemies below a certain level, and since the game never tells you what level your enemies are, the whole thing is guesswork. Ridiculous. Anyway, long story short, I decided to start a new character focused purely on Illusion – to the point that I would never even attack anyone myself.

Unfortunately Snica, my pacifist illusionist cat, doesn't start with any Illusion spells. When my first ally, Hadvar, suggests we split up on the way to Riverwood, I follow three steps behind him for the whole journey. In the middle of a speech about the Guardian Stones, a pack of wolves scamper down the hill and attack. SAVE ME HADVAR.

I hide behind him, and he dispatches each wolf with a single swipe. At Riverwood I sell what I picked up at the castle (everything in the castle) and buy the following spells: Fury (make enemies attack each other), Calm (stop them attacking me), and Courage (boost friends' health and damage a bit). I set off for Whiterun.

It works! I can Fury wolves! I still don't know what level they are, but I no longer care: Illusion works. I make them fight each other until there's only one left alive, then Calm it and run.

With just one skill to focus on, I can spend all my perk points boosting the level of my Illusion spells, so that they'll always be good enough to mess with whatever-level enemies the game throws at me.

It's a good idea with only eight or nine flaws, the first of which is dragons. Illusion magic doesn't work on dragons. The first time I fight one, with the guards of Whiterun at my side, I just have to hide in the tower casting Courage on the troops. "Yeah, hit him guys! Lookin' good! You can do it!"

Courage ought to be a nice thing, but it also forces allies to get back up when they're incapacitated. Every time the captain of the guard tries to take a breather, I Courage her and she has to stand up and start swiping at a dragon the size of a private jet. I'm helping!

> **"Focusing on Illusion is a good idea with only eight or nine flaws. The first of which is dragons."**

It takes 15 minutes for her to kill the dragon, which by then has eaten every other guard whole. When it's finally over, the townspeople of Whiterun hurry over to gawp at the amazing hero who saved them. Apparently, that's me.

I look at the captain and cast Calm.

READ ME
RELEASED November 2011
OUR REVIEW PCG 235, 94%
BUY IT bit.ly/zYfpq4, £35
MORE www.elderscrolls.com

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"Dumb persistence just doesn't cut it here"

MASTERING THE SHOOTER **JAMESTOWN**, WITHOUT REALLY WANTING TO

Chris Donlan

Now Playing: *Jamestown*
This month: Learned when to move and when to shoot. At last!
Also Played: *SpaceChem, Trine 2*

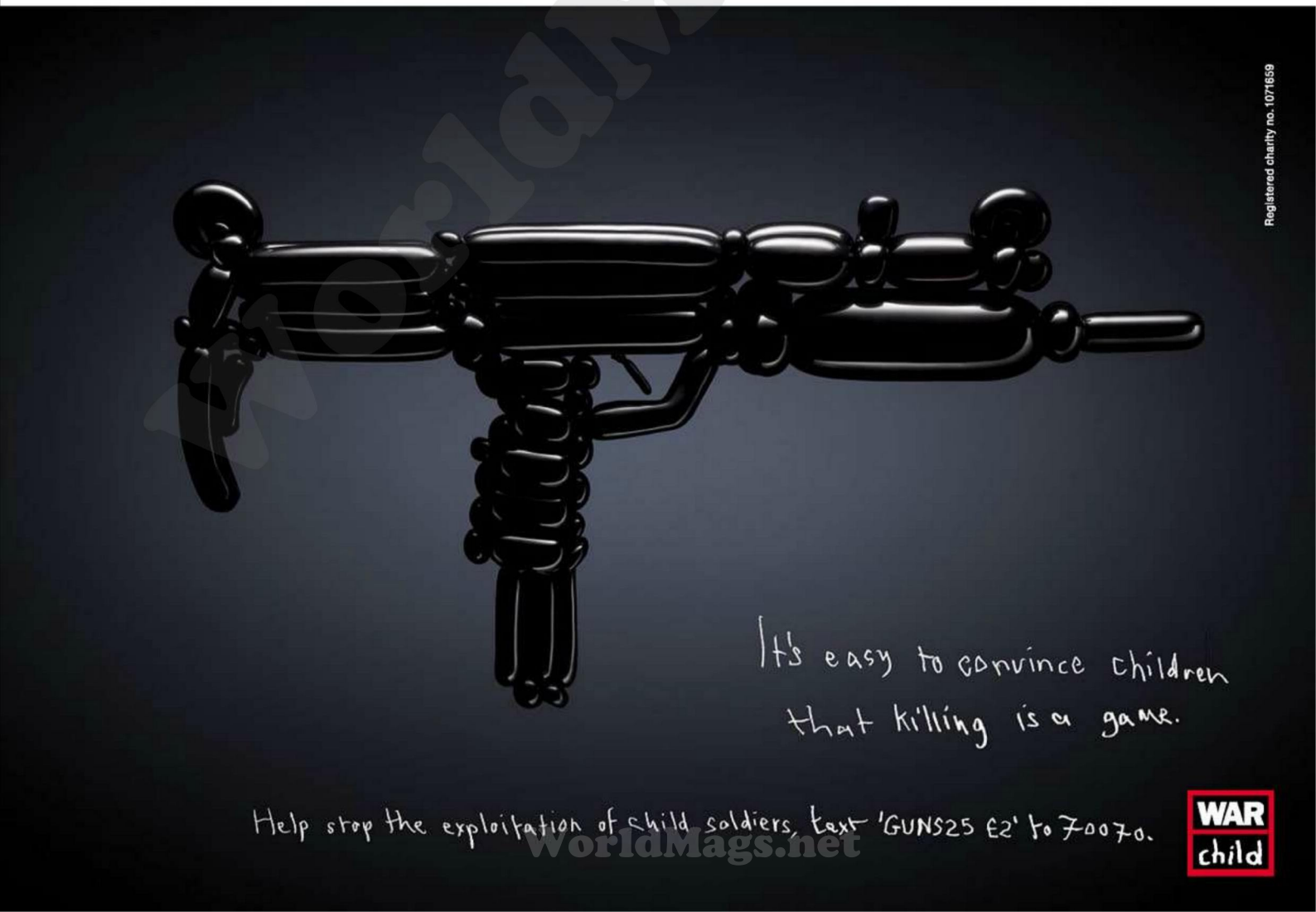
I love vertical-scrolling shooters, but they belong to the huge category of games that I'm not any good at. Normally, it doesn't matter: I'm here for the art and the excitement, so I go for the easiest setting, jam my finger on the fire button, and chew through continues until I've beaten the campaign by sheer persistence.

Jamestown isn't having any of that. I've *had* to become good at it – and that's been kind of annoying. If you play on the easiest setting, the campaign is only three chapters long. The whole thing lasts approximately seven minutes. To unlock the fourth chapter, you have to play the first three on the hardest setting. Then you unlock a new difficulty level, and have to play the first *four* chapters like that to move on once more. You get the idea.

READ ME
RELEASED June 2011
OUR REVIEW PCG 230 78%
BUY IT Steam £7
MORE www.finalformgames.com/jamestown

I've had to come to understand the balance of each craft's weapons. I've had to memorise enemy waves, and discover the best spots to lurk during bullet-hell boss attacks.

It's weird: *being good* at a game after years of mediocrity. When the final credits started to roll, I didn't feel satisfied, I felt hungry for more. A new skill learned: what else can I use it on? I guess this is why they make DLC.



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TOP 10 DOWNLOADS

The M4 between Swindon and Marlborough, 2150.

1 Hit light speed

FREEWARE FLY OFF THE GRID IN **NITRONIC RUSH**

The lovechild of Tron, *TrackMania* and Transformers, *Nitronic Rush* is a time-trial racer made by students at the DigiPen Institute of Technology in the USA. They've dubbed it a 'survival driving game', where each course is divided into hazard-lined chunks.

Success is still a case of getting to the finish line as fast as possible, but each individual section can be replayed immediately if failed, each failure applying a penalty to your final score. It's a smart move that retains the pace of a racing game while still rewarding perfectionism.

Hazards range from simple pitfalls and blockades to rotating blades, massive ravines and fields of spikes that form in front of you as you hurtle forward. You've got several options to traverse these: your Tron-style car is fitted with rocket boosters that fire forward, back, down and to the sides, as well as retractable wings that pop out on request. These can be combined to provide a wide range of abilities, from sudden braking to jumping, rolling, and even flight.

CHRIS SAYS...
"Everything should be adorned with strips of neon. Even strips of neon."

The downside is that each rocket adds to a heat bar, and filling up your heat bar causes you to explode. Reaching the finish is thus a case of balancing the risk of driving around the obstacles against the risk of using rockets to power yourself over them – a quandary that you're asked to consider several times per race.

The game looks great. The team have obviously taken Tron as a basis, but made it their own with lots of incidental detail, moving scenery and dry humour lurking behind the scenes. While described as a tribute to the racers of the '90s, *Nitronic Rush* actually feels much more modern, easily able to pass for a commercial indie game.

The only caveat is that in order to get the most out of it you're going to need an Xbox controller, as it's been designed with two analogue sticks in mind – all those extra abilities make keyboard play a bit cumbersome. Regardless, this is a racing game well worth taking for a spin. **CT**

SIZE 467MB **LINK** bit.ly/nitronicrush

2 MOD

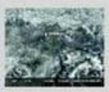
CTRL+ALDMER+DELETE

SORT YOUR LIFE OUT WITH THESE *SKYRIM* USER INTERFACE MODS

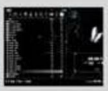
Let's not beat around the bush: *Skyrim*'s UI was not designed for a mouse and keyboard. Thankfully, the modding community is on hand to set things right. Cheers, guys.

SkyUI inventory
Tabs for different item types, sorting by size, etc. Impressive stuff – can't wait for the full version. *bit.ly/pcgskyui*

Categorised favourites menu
You can now have a screen-filling list of all your preferred abilities pop up on demand. *bit.ly/pcgcustomfavs*



A quality world map with roads
Adds roads to the world map, helping you to avoid awkward navigational faux pas. *bit.ly/pcgqualitymap*



Better sorting
Renames crafting materials, potions and soul gems so that they're ordered more usefully by name and quality. *bit.ly/pcgbettersort*

WorldMags.net

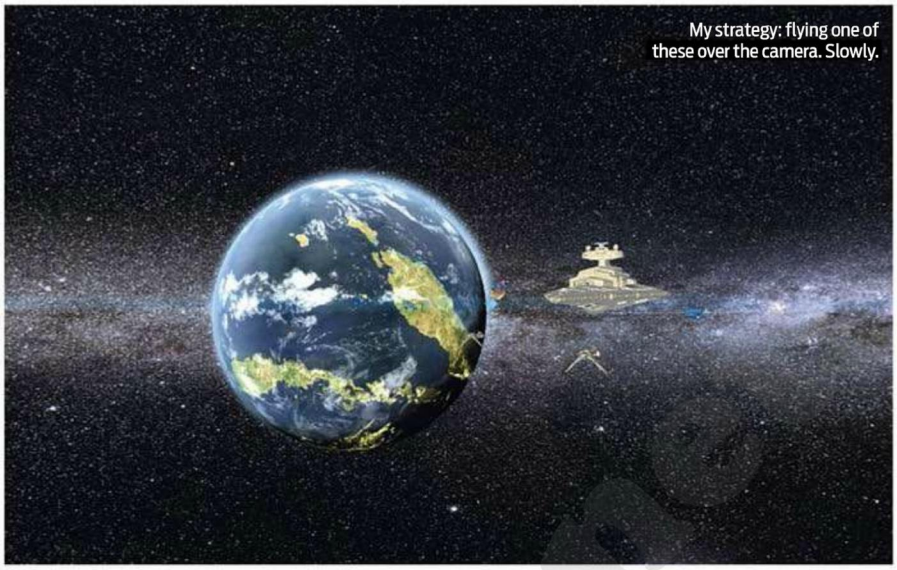
3 DEATH STARS

MOD CRUSH REBELS IN SINS OF A GALACTIC EMPIRE

We're big fans of *Sins of a Solar Empire* here at PC Gamer, and equally big fans of Star Wars. *Sins of a Galactic Empire*, then, is a dangerous proposition: an X-Wings-and-Star-Destroyers total conversion for Ironclad's epic game of stellar strategy.

Born from the ashes of a Star Wars *Homeworld 2* mod, it's an incredibly comprehensive package, featuring not only the Empire and Rebel Alliance but the Republic, CIS, New Republic and Yuuzhan Vong factions – each with their own units, specialities, and research trees. If you know how all of those groups fit together, then *Galactic Empire* has you squarely in its targeting computer.

It plays like *Sins of a Solar Empire* – which is to say, a 4X-style space conquest game in real-time, played on a massive, zoomable scale – but the Star Wars overhaul is more than just a reskin. Fighters and bombers are more prevalent from the start, resources are more numerous, and ships are faster, giving combat a riskier, scrappier feel.



My strategy: flying one of these over the camera. Slowly.

There's also been a concerted effort to give frigates more interesting things to do: the Corellian Corvette, for example, is not only a scout ship but a blockade runner that can smuggle resources through enemy territory.

The mod was built for an older version of *Sins*, dubbed Entrenchment, so if you own a later version remember to run the game using the Entrenchment.exe file located in the game's installation folder. **CT**

SIZE 727MB LINK bit.ly/sinsgalactic

4 Scripted sequence

FREEWARE WRAP YOUR HEAD AROUND ROBOT UNLOCK

Can you rewrite a memory address by designing a mathematical formula in the form of a course for a robot to run along? You'd better hope so, or you're going to be stuck here for a very long time.

A DIAL UP
The numbers on the bottom are the addresses you're trying to match. That means creating a system that dials in each number in turn and then ends at exactly the right point.

B HELLO OPERATOR
This is your robot. He travels the course you lay out for him, altering the values of the memory address when he passes the right symbols, ie, pluses and minuses.

C DOUBLE PRONGED
If the robot hits a fork, he splits in two, doubling the potential complexity of your designs. You can achieve more in a single pass, but it's harder to wrap your head around.

SIZE 20MB LINK bit.ly/zanTmx

5 MOD

MONSTER MASH

REPEL THE COMBINED MIGHT OF THE '90S IN *AEONS OF DEATH V6.0*

If there was a *Super Smash Bros* for PC gaming, it would look something like this *Doom 2* mod. *Aeons of Death* randomises the monsters and weapons of any level you happen to plug in to it, throwing in any FPS baddie you can think of.

It starts with the classics – *Duke Nukem, Quake, Hexen* – but quickly escapes the '90s to include

> "That's right: you can fight a Cyberdemon alongside Barney, with the *Portal* gun"

Half-Life 2, *Bulletstorm*, *Portal* and more. That's right: you can fight a Cyberdemon alongside Barney with the *Portal* gun, in the *Doom 2* engine. There's even a *Left 4 Dead* mode that fills levels with relentless hordes of zombies. Sold yet? **CT**

SIZE 314.7MB LINK bit.ly/aeonsofdeath

WorldMags.net

6

MOD

REWRITE REALITY

CHANGE THE WORLD USING ONLY *WORDS AND PHYSICS*

A short, smart browser-based puzzler, this presents you with environments where words are objects with the properties of those words. The goal is to remove a particular object, helpfully called 'REMOVEME', from the level.

To do so you rewrite certain words, which can be as simple as adding letters to extend a platform, or something clever like changing

"Words like 'FIRE' have exactly the effect you'd imagine on words like 'BOMB'"

'MOVELEFT' to 'MOVERIGHT' to redirect mobile objects.

The complexity quickly ramps up, given that words like 'FIRE' have exactly the effect you'd imagine on words such as 'BOMB'. Later puzzles also ask you to consider the physical effect of the speed at which you type. It'll only take you half an hour to see the whole game, but there's a fascinating concept here that we'd like to see again in a more substantial version. **CT**

SIZE Browser-based
LINK bit.ly/wordsandphysics

7 Demonic intervention

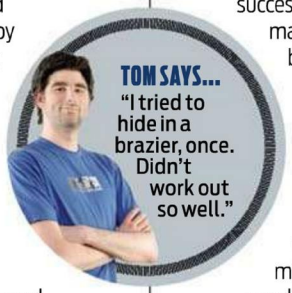
FREEWARE BECOME A MASTER OF SHADOWS IN **DEITY**

The second DigiPen project to make this month's list, *Deity* is an experimental isometric stealth game. Here you play a purple demon whose underground dungeon home has been invaded by a bunch of pesky treasure-seeking warriors and mages.

The situation may sound familiar, but this is no *Dungeon Keeper* knock-off. Goodbye chicken management, hello stealthy, demonic attacks from the shadows.

It's mouse controlled, using the button click to run around normally and the right to surge forward in a teleporting column of smoke. Teleporting is also your means of attack, as jumping into an enemy will cause them to explode in a shower of gibs.

Being demonic, you take damage whenever you're in the light, so you need to use your teleport to douse braziers which subsequently act as vantage points in the manner of *Arkham Asylum*'s gargoyles. You also take damage if you teleport into an enemy head-on: success requires successfully getting behind foes, which is made more difficult if you're actively being sought out. Your 'chain' ability allows you to queue up a series of teleports in advance, creating complicated rebounds that can take out groups of enemies before they can react.



The system is versatile enough to allow you to recover from mistakes, while still emphasising the need for a careful, considered approach – ideal for a stealth game.

Deity doesn't last much longer than an hour, but its core concept is an impressive blend of different ideas – it could support a *Diablo*-style dungeon crawler just as easily as a stealth puzzler. **TS**

SIZE 185MB LINK bit.ly/pcgdiety

8 Long running

FREEWARE EXPLORE THE HISTORY OF THE **MARATHON TRILOGY**

Open-source *Marathon*-revival project *Aleph One* recently got the official nod from original devs Bungie – now known for *Halo*.

Launched as the Mac response to *Doom*, *Marathon* places much stronger emphasis on narrative. As you wander the halls of abandoned starships and the surfaces of alien worlds, you're guided by an AI who provides mission objectives and exposition. The second game even has voiced NPC allies that teleport in from time to time to provide assistance. While its weapons don't have the heft or variety of an id shooter, *Marathon* is notable for its atmosphere and the way it anticipated the plot-heavy future of the FPS.

This latest release comprises all three original games, with revamped HD textures, network play and support for modern resolutions.

As was the norm at the time, the maze-like environments can be confusing and often assume that you'll hammer the Use key on anything that looks vaguely interactive. Yet the trilogy is still well worth revisiting. If you were exclusively a PC gamer in the '90s, then there's every chance you missed it entirely: here's an opportunity to set that right. **CT**

SIZE 291MB LINK bit.ly/x45Ner

WorldMags.net

9 Those who dare

INDIE SPEND SOME QUALITY TIME WITH YOURSELF AND THE BEST OF **LUDUM DARE 22**

The *Ludum Dare* competition challenges developers to create full games on a specified theme in only 48 hours. The 22nd competition, held in December 2011, was based around the concept 'alone' and received over 890 entries. They vary wildly, from puzzle games to platformers, survival horror to satire. Source code is available for most entries. If you're interested in turning your hand to game development, this is a good place to learn more.

The best of the bunch showcase ideas that could sustain full games, and in many cases, probably should. We've picked out three differently enjoyable entries, but it's worth taking a look for yourself: chances are that the next big indie hit is lurking somewhere in there. **CT**

The Word Alone

This puzzle game by Matt Rix presents you with a jumbled grid of letters and asks you to remove all but those contained in the word 'alone' in as few moves as possible. To do this, you pick tiles from anywhere on the grid that form three-letter words and use them to shunt other tiles around. A test of both your spatial reasoning and your vocabulary.

SIZE Web-based LINK bit.ly/wsFc9j

Minicraft

Notch's entry is a stripped down and focused isometric take on *Minecraft*. You'll still punch trees to make axes to chop trees to make picks to mine stone, but the goal this time is simply to develop to the point where you can kill the only other person in your randomly-generated world. You get one life only, giving it more of a roguelike feel.

SIZE Web-based LINK bit.ly/ynhRlp

We are Alone

This places you on a randomly generated mountainside under mysterious circumstances. You're dying of exposure, and being pursued by wolves. To escape you'll need to track down a variety of items, but if you die, that's it: pick a new character, start over. Yet it's all persistent: the footprints of your previous selves remain, as do the items they were carrying at death.

SIZE 1.4MB LINK bit.ly/w6bueD

10 WEBGAME

THE WORM TURNS

CUT A SWATHE THROUGH *ARMED WITH WINGS: CULMINATION*

Absolutely nothing to do with a food-fight in a KFC, this is a browser-based action platformer. You control a nimble swordsman as he runs, leaps and slashes his way through 15 short, monochrome stages. It looks great, with hand-drawn anime-inspired characters and an evocative palette.

Of particular note are the combat animations. Strikes leave elegant

"Enemies hang in the air just long enough to chain together multiple-hit assaults"

trails behind them and enemies hang in the air just long enough for you to chain together multiple-hit aerial assaults.Special attacks are unlocked as you rack up hits against your enemies. Your ultimate move allows you to dash between them and is used for some inventive platforming later on.

The plot is that you're in pursuit of a villain called Vandheer Lorde, and that's about it, but there's a twist at the end that encourages repeat play and exploration of the game's two difficulty levels. **CT**

SIZE Browser-based LINK bit.ly/A9jLCi

Culmination looks lovely in motion.

MACHINIMA

THIS **MINECRAFT** DEATH STAR TRENCH RUN IS ONE IN A MILLION

YouTuber Paradise Decay has recreated the entire Battle of Yavin in *Minecraft*. It took him four months, and everything you see was made by hand: from the two different Death Star models to Luke's X-Wing and Vader's TIE fighter. **CT**
bit.ly/wHSMl0

Attack what?

1 Unfortunately *Minecraft* doesn't provide a means of locking S-foils in attack position, but glowstone blocks for the Rebel X- and Y-Wing starfighter engines are a nice touch.

Watch yourself

2 Cockpit cam is a man in a box surrounded by pieces of glass, while the camera shakes to give the impression that he's doing something exciting. So, pretty close to the movie.

I'm hit!

3 *Minecraft*'s rotating heads are ideal for R2-D2. The trench is lava-lit and full of turrets that, if you look closely, seem to fire grass. Environmentally friendly, the Empire.

Great shot, kid

4 Oh no! The Death Star is full of TNT. To be fair, that's only slightly less plausible than an open ventilation shaft that leads directly to a lethally vulnerable reactor core.

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THE MOD FACTOR

MIKE CHANNELL LOOKS AT HOW **RFACTOR**'S COMMUNITY HAVE TRANSFORMED THE GAME

READ ME
PUBLISHER ISI
DEVELOPER In-house
REQUIRES 1.4GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 128MB 3D card
MULTIPLAYER Dependent on circuit
LINK rfactor.net

We all know the timeline of a heavily modded game. Developers make an exciting release that's fat with tasty content, then that serves as inspiration for an enterprising community. *rFactor* did things slightly differently – when it was released it had a minimal amount of entirely fictional content. Rather than blowing cash on licences and then building its own cars and circuits, developers ISI concentrated on constructing a game that was purpose-built as a modding platform for a community that had already done incredible things with their *F1* games.

Since the sim crowd is by definition pedantic about realism, they've turned *rFactor* into a series of gloriously faithful reproductions of real-life cars and circuits, often fettled to within centimetres of the real thing. And because ISI was complicit from the start, all of them could be bolted into *rFactor* by a moderately intelligent house plant. The vast majority of mods are even helpfully collected on a single community website (rfactorcentral.com), just in case you were worried gravity wouldn't co-operate as you pitched yourself off this particular log.

Get your motor running

To get a taste of what *rFactor* has become, you could do worse than to start with the *Formula One* mods. *F1* is the Simpsons of motorsport – ubiquitous and generally agreed to be not quite as good as it used to be. So while you could marvel at the glossy majesty of CTDP's 2005 and 2006 versions, neither of those was a classic season. Better to delve a bit deeper into history, back to a time when the power of the engines vastly outstripped the designers' ability to keep them pointing in a straight line.

Take the 1988 mod by the enigmatically named carrera.4 for example: the era of Prost, Senna, Mansell and engines that lobbed out close to 700hp when the turbo spooled up. Just keeping these things on the road is the kind of challenge that mollycoddling commercial racers rarely offer. There are even contemporary versions of 14 of the circuits to race them around. That's right, it's not enough to just have a copy of Monza on your hard drive – in *rFactor* you can have the version from 1988 too, where there are surprise extra corners and adverts for fags and booze everywhere.

While *Grand Prix Legends* began a lifelong love affair with the romance and danger of 60s motorsport within the sim community, it's

"*rFactor* did things differently: on release it had just a small amount of fictional content"

arguably the following decade that has been muse for some of *rFactor*'s best mods. The *1979 Formula One* mod by Grand Prix Classics and *F1 Seven 1975*, which was converted from *F1 Challenge*, both give you an entire grid of tail happy cars to play with. And downloading the '70 Nordschleife 1.00' version of the Nurburgring, converted by motorfx from that same *F1 Seven* mod, will offer you hours of hot-lapping nirvana. For real hipster petrolhead cred, the more obscure *F5000* mods covering 1971-1973 place a similar emphasis on fat tyres, powerful engines and only semi-unintentional powersliding. The feeling of heroism is unmatched.

Anyone who's watched Steve McQueen squint and grumble his way through the 1971 film Le Mans owes it to themselves to download the astonishingly comprehensive, 125-car *1970 World Sportscar* mod, by certified lunatics CSGT. It's only three entries shy of the full field for the most famous 24-hour race on the planet, so you'll want to take a rare excursion over to simracingworld.com, pick up the 'Le Mans 1970 *rFactor* Track' from there and try a petrifying midnight blast down the Mulsanne Straight yourself.

While tyres on tarmac is what *rFactor*'s physics engine is built for, there are a few worthwhile offroad mods as well. Probably the most entertaining is Historic Rally Cars – not least because the majority of the cars are rear-wheel drive, and the legendarily overpowered Group B vehicles (which were eventually banned) are healthily represented. Be sure to download the version with the Pikes Peak add-on, which pits you against the now neutered hillclimb: if the rear bumper of the car isn't regularly hanging over fresh air, you're not trying hard enough.

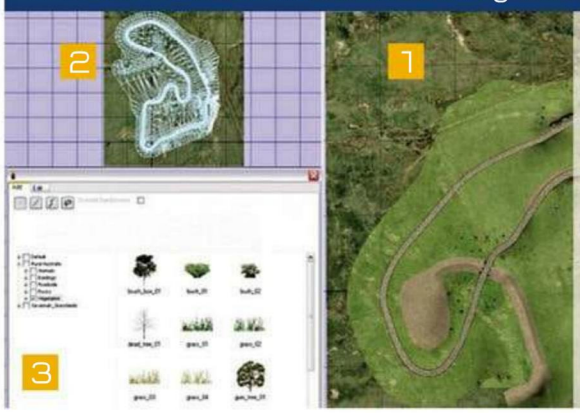
rFactor's modding community has transformed it to cater to more unusual tastes, too, but even the bonkers stuff is reasonably authentic. Take the inexplicable discipline of truck racing, for example. There are genuine racing drivers who plonk themselves in the cab of an Iveco every other weekend, and with *Trucks Series Racing 2.00* you can do exactly the same. Manhandling the cab of an artic around F1 circuits may sound ridiculous, but managing the seemingly unstoppable momentum and making the most out of its basso profundo diesel engine is a unique challenge.

But perhaps even that isn't wacky enough for you. How about attempting to break the land speed record in *rFactor*'s fastest real-world vehicle? One that ditches the faithful internal combustion engine in favour of kerosene gobbling twin jets? The *Thrust SSC* mod by by Hemetola invites you to smash the sound barrier on a bespoke Bonneville salt flats track designed for speed records. You'll have to be careful, though – play the throttle like a gin-soaked fiddler and you'll turn those two turbofan engines into useless slag.

Or if the endless pursuit of more power is beginning to weary you, you can download cars that have no more torque than a baby's pram. *Soapbox Racing 1.01* by Madcowie removes the engine and forces you to rely on gravity, laser-precise driving lines and absolute efficiency to win races. Even this mod is entertaining, and you can't ask for clearer proof that *rFactor* is the most flexible racing sim around.

That's why it has become essential. It's unlikely ISI realised just how wholeheartedly the community would embrace the game, and the variety and consistently high quality of mods has turned *rFactor* from risky experiment to a glorious game. What started as a single racing simulator is now hundreds of them, all offering a different challenge and all freely available to download. It's like car-bore-Christmas every single day.

DIY Bob's Track Builder makes creating circuits wheel-y easy



1. Draw your track
Shareware track designer Bob's Track Builder allows you to literally draw the circuit, then play it in-game.

2. Import details
In one of Track Builder's neatest tricks, you can import satellite photography from programs like Google Maps.

3. Populate your track
You can also dump in foliage with ease, and even have the option to automatically put up fencing.

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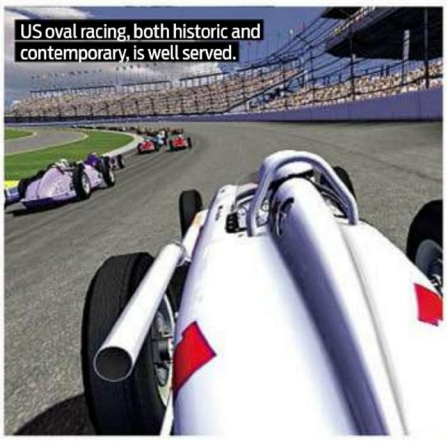
The famous Loews hairpin in Monaco, circa 1975.

All of the guts, none of the glamour: truck racing is more fun than it looks.

Suddenly we really want a shot of vodka and a cigarette.


US oval racing, both historic and contemporary, is well served.

The best mods come with track packs that recreate the courses of the era.

According to some people, this is the last time Formula One was interesting.

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Find the coolest, craziest toys in Steelport

PHIL SAVAGE'S GUIDE TO BEING SILLY IN **SAINTS ROW: THE THIRD**

GET STARTED

DIFFICULTY Easy

TIME 5 hours

VITAL LINKS:

The Saints Row Wiki
bit.ly/SaintsWiki

Saints Row Community page
bit.ly/SaintsCommunity

The PC Gamer guide to being a toilet
bit.ly/SaintsLoo

Interactive stat tracking and leaderboard
bit.ly/SaintsStats

Saints Row: The Third is frothing mad, pushing 21st century excess way past any logical conclusion. Part hip-hop obsession with sex and celebrity, part hyper-violent action movie at its most infantile – you could accuse it of being satirical if it didn't seem to be having so much fun.

It's also a complete and utter exhibitionist. As an open-world game that's clearly dedicated to messing about, there is always the temptation to skip the story in favour of causing havoc on the streets. Don't. Some of the best stuff to be found comes from completing the main missions, where the game can show off these goodies in gloriously over-the-top set-pieces.

But there is plenty to find outside of the 3rd Street Saints' tale of revenge and marketing opportunities. This handy guide collects the best of the game's crazy secrets for you – both things to find around the city of Steelport, and recommendations for what to choose in story missions with multiple rewards.

Don't worry about spoilers. The most enjoyable moments in *Saints Row: The Third* arise from the game's continual ability to surprise you with how far it will go for a cheap laugh, so mission and plot details are kept as vague as possible.

1 Upgrade your pistols

Your starting pistol, the 45 Shepherd, isn't the most exciting weapon you'll encounter. Upgrade it at a Friendly Fire store though, and it will be one of the best. At Level 4 not only is your Shepherd unrivalled in damage and accuracy, but gains explosive rounds that cause enemies to ragdoll around as they die. Combine it with the Dual Wield ability and it'll see you through the game. Be aware though that using it will lower accuracy.

2 Start chemical warfare

With so many weapons and upgrades competing for your money, it would be easy to overlook *SR3*'s only non-lethal weapon. That would be a mistake. Upgrade the flashbang grenades to Level 4 and they become the 'Fart In a Jar'. It's exactly what it sounds like: a container full of noxious gas that causes anyone caught in its wide area of effect to gag and vomit, helpless against your other, more deadly, weapons.

3 Invest in transport

Cars are all well and good, but sometimes you want to take a more direct route to your destination. If you buy Rondini's Boat Dock and the Airplane Hanger at Wesley Cutter International, you'll be given a selection of boats and planes to choose from. Pick of the bunch are the Commander, a tough and bulky military boat with a .50 calibre machine gun and mounted rockets, and the AB Destroyer attack plane.

4 Get to the chopper

Complete the fifth mission, Party Time, and the Saints will gain a headquarters and, more importantly, a helipad. Now to put something on it. Head to the National Guard Base, located on the unmarked island east of the Downtown district, and grab the Eagle. The National Guard won't be too pleased about your visit, but that's hardly a problem when you're in the game's most destructive helicopter.

5 Burn your enemies

If you find yourself mourning the late, great Johnny Gat, there's a fitting tribute to be found on the streets of Steelport. The Gat Mobile is a blinging purple and white van with a giant Gat head mounted on the front. The cigarette in his mouth? Actually a flamethrower. While it's quite rare to see it out on the open road, a parked one spawns in the parking lot in front of the Planet Saints store in north Yearwood.

6 Clean up the streets

Take most cars to a Rim Jobs garage and you will be able to get some basic customisation options, from paintjobs to a choice of gaudy spoilers. However, take one of the commonly seen street sweepers to a garage and you can upgrade it into a spiked monstrosity that would make Mad Max proud. Unsurprisingly it handles like a piece of crap, but it can easily shunt anything you crash into out of the way.

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7 Make mobile bombs

You'll gain the RC Possessor as a reward for completing Act 1. In its standard form it's a largely pointless device for remotely controlling any civilian car you choose. Upgrade it to Level 3, however, and you can use it to detonate them instead, filling the game with fully manoeuvrable and infinitely respawning bombs. It's perfect for clearing Gang Operations, as rival gang members will appear near their now deadly vehicles.

8 Download a car

Those old anti-piracy ads don't really apply to the Saints – not only *would* they steal a car, they'd happily pirate one too. Complete all three Trail Blazer activities located in the Deckers' territory, and the fast and furious Wraith car and X-2 Phantom motorbike will be added to your garage. These sleek neon vehicles are taken from the Deckers' *Tron*-like version of the Internet, and rank among the fastest in the game.

9 Steal a jet

When STAG, the anti-gang squad, arrive midway through Act 2, you get a whole new set of destructive vehicles. Most of them – like the awesome Crusader Tank – you'll have to take the hard way, by building notoriety and stealing them when they come after you. Fortunately STAG's best toy, the F-69 VTOL jet, is parked in their makeshift base in the north-west section of the park in Sunset Park. What are you waiting for?

10 Get oversized fists

Complete the mission Murderbrawl XXXI and you're given a choice: spare your opponent or unmask him - the ultimate insult for a Luchador wrestler. Spare him. While helping your enemies save face might not seem in keeping with the Saints' usual approach to conflict resolution, the reward is worth it. You'll gain the Apoca-Fists, a melee weapon that insta-gibs pedestrians and destroys vehicles in just a few punches.

11 Make a hover bike

During the My Name Is Cyrus mission, you're asked to choose two of three potential research projects. Whether you pick the Satchel Charges or the upgraded Crusader Tank is down to personal preference; just make sure you select the hover bike. It's awesome. It doesn't simply float a couple of inches off the ground – it has the same functionality as a VTOL jet, but is small and nimble to boot.

12 Survive a zombie invasion

There's a wide selection of melee weapons available, but your enemies have an unsporting habit of bringing guns to your dildo fight. Head to the Extras section of your phone and enter the code 'brains' into the cheat menu to turn the citizens of Steelport into mindless zombies. They're ridiculously weak but the sheer number of them coming at you from every direction is guaranteed to provide a challenge.

SKILLS

ESSENTIAL UPGRADES

BUY THESE UPGRADES TO STAY SAFE...

1 Combat Upgrades improve survivability, allowing you to withstand more of a specific type of damage. Bullet and vehicle upgrades take priority – they're what you'll be taking the most damage from throughout the campaign.

2 While you'll clash with rival gangs often, it's the cops that provide the most consistent threat throughout the game. With the Notoriety: Cops upgrade you'll lose them much faster, saving you from having to find a hideout.

3 Sprint not only allows you to quickly get away from damage, but also helps perform instant car thefts and quick takedowns. You can increase your sprint meter by up to 100%, ensuring you'll never run out at a key moment.

BONUS TIP

GET RESPECT

Fly to the Luchadores' turf and blow up their cars. They can't retaliate, so you'll easily build cash and Respect.

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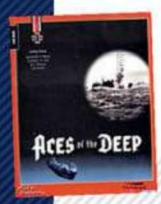
Sink enough tea freighters and England surrenders.

"In an instant, lethargy turns to lethal intent"

TIM STONE INSERTS A DAS BOOT DISK AND PLAYS **ACES OF THE DEEP**



READ ME

FIRST RELEASED
1994

PUBLISHER
Sierra On-Line

DEVELOPER
Dynamix

REQUIRES
486 CPU, 8MB RAM

LINK
www.subsim.com

INFLUENCED BY
Silent Service II, Das Boot

GET IT FROM
Abandonware/ reissued as *Command Aces of the Deep*

No headstone marks the resting place of Joachim Gratz and his comrades. A slick of diesel oil indicated the spot for an hour or two, but was quickly dispersed by restless currents and churning destroyer screws. That's how life goes in one of the finest wet warfare sims ever made: one minute you're an infamous ace of the deep, the next you're gone, erased by a vast and merciless ocean.

Joachim's mistake was overconfidence. He chose to strike when he should have shadowed or slunk away. Because Dynamix's U-Boot classic comes with an unpredictable freelance-friendly dynamic campaign, you're constantly having to make bally difficult decisions. Do you prey on vulnerable stragglers or go after potentially richer and more dangerous convoys? Do you act alone or radio contacts to BdU (U-boat HQ) and wait for wolfpacks to form? Every patrol is peppered with the kind of hard choices that elevate blood pressure and add silver to brine-beaded beards and temples.

Every patrol is also sprinkled with periods of intense tedium. Fortunately, it's the good sort of tedium – *historical* tedium. Tedium laced with hope, fear, and thoughts of home. Still, any skipper wishing to hang onto his sanity has little choice but to make generous use of the time acceleration key during cruises to and from assigned (but ignorable) patrol areas. What renders this tolerable – enjoyable even – is that at any moment a mugshot of your watch officer may pop up with an excited "Smoke on the horizon, Captain!" or "Aircraft spotted!" Suddenly, magazines are tossed aside, midi gramophones silenced. In an instant, lethargy turns to lethal intent.

"At any moment, a mugshot of your watch officer may pop up with an excited 'Smoke on the horizon, Captain!'"

Many of today's combat sim artisans seem more interested in modelling vehicles and weapon systems than ensuring their customers aren't baffled or bored. Dynamix always had the knack of creating characterful campaigns, and capturing the *essence* rather than the minutiae of war machines.

Don't be misled by the lack of polygonal tars, chart accoutrements, or Torpedo Data Computer knobs in the pics above. If we don't manually enter data into our TDCs, scribble solutions on charts, or small-talk with seamen, we still confront most of the same operational dilemmas real WWII submariners faced. Hard-pressed *AotD*ers will find themselves forced to surface at inopportune times to recharge batteries and load externally stored eels. Early on they'll regularly curse unreliable detonators. Occasionally, they may find themselves reluctantly issuing a 'secure from silent running' order so life-saving pumps can be activated.

There are no 3D ports in *AotD*, yet homecomings and departures manage to be memorable thanks to splendid cutscenes in which your vessel slips past a quay lined with waving locals and a blaring brass band. Once ashore, you can nip off to a nightclub to catch

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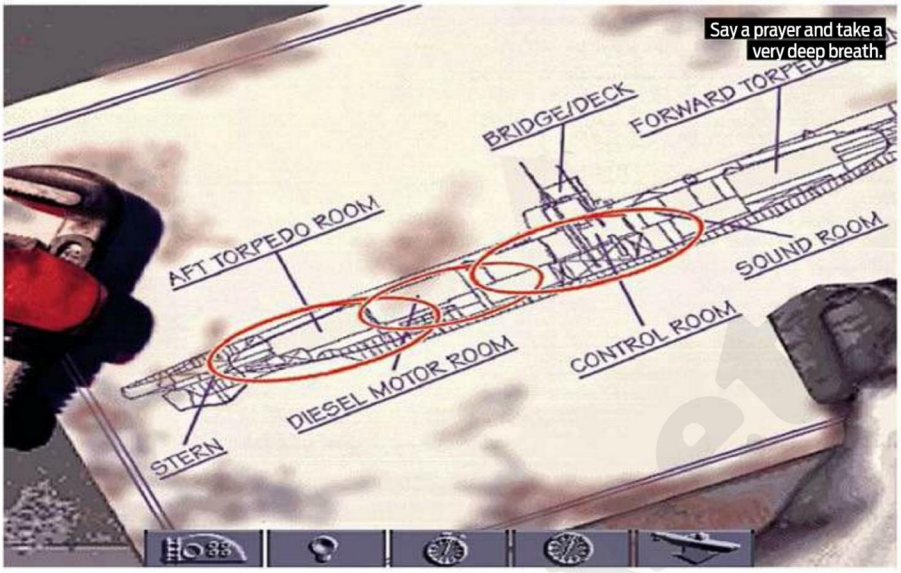


up on news of the wider war, overhear snippets of potentially useful gossip, or drunkenly ogle a torch singer's stocking tops.

At sea, loneliness is kept at bay by a record player and radio messages from the continent. You hear reports of other U-boats coming and going, updates on convoys. I still get a buzz out of radioing-in sightings, and informing my superiors my craft has sent another rust-streaked toiler to the bottom. Receiving an appreciative "Keep up the good work U-113" is every bit as motivating as gaining a promotion, medal or new sub type on return to base.

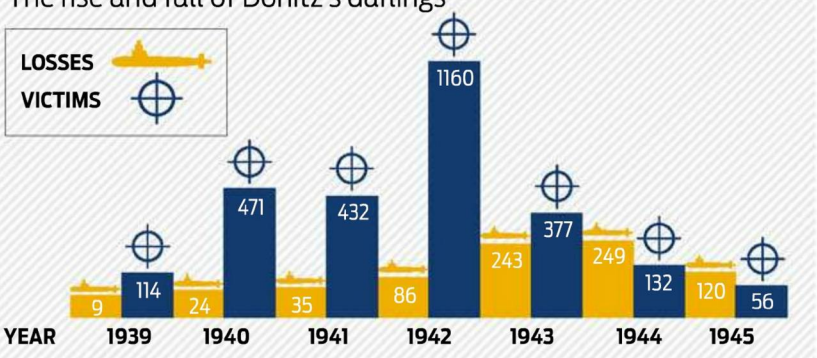
It's in the tense vertical encounters between escorts and U-boats that *AotD*'s quality really shows. Herr Gratz thought he could sneak past the ASDIC-equipped destroyers shepherding a large Mediterranean convoy. He thought wrong. The game's gamekeepers are endowed with just the right amount of vigilance and persistence. With skill and good fortune you can elude them, but get cocky or fixated, and you can end up watching a depth-gauge needle sweep unstoppably towards The Red Segments of Doom.

The campaign, like the war it mirrors so masterfully, has an in-built difficulty curve. In '39 and early '40 – the 'Happy Time' – lone freighters and tankers are easy to find. As the months roll by, newer, more capable U-boat designs come into service, but the advances are offset by a more organised and better-equipped foe. Only the wiliest and luckiest captains will stay alive long enough to take command of the awesome sonar-endowed Type XXI with its huge battery capacity and programmable zig-zagging eels.

Prone to texture transparency at very close range, the ship models haven't aged well. What has stood the test of time is Peter Lukaszuk's remarkable recreation of an ocean swell. The roll of an *AotD* rough sea is almost as sickening as the thought that Dynamix never got round to making the Pacific theatre expansion or Cold War sequel they talked about.

From hunter to hunted

The rise and fall of Dönitz's darlings



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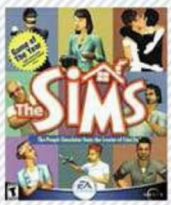
THE MAKING OF...

THE SIMS

HOW WILL WRIGHT AND A STUBBORN FEW TURNED HUMANITY INTO A GAME THAT ANYONE COULD PLAY. ***By Dan Griliopoulos***

Sims: having the exciting life that you won't.



READ ME

FIRST REVIEWED
PCG 80, 85%

PUBLISHER
EA

DEVELOPER
Maxis/EA

RELEASE
2000

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On 20 October 1991, *Sim City* creator Will Wright thought he could smell smoke at his home in California. He gathered his family and, as a precaution, left the house. The smell turned out to be the Oakland Firestorm, an event akin to a massed flaming cyclone, which raged for three days and did $1.5 billion of damage.

One of the nearly 4,000 homes it destroyed was Wright's. He had already been thinking of creating a virtual doll's house. Now, bereft of possessions and home, he found himself gathering the belongings that were basic to modern human life.

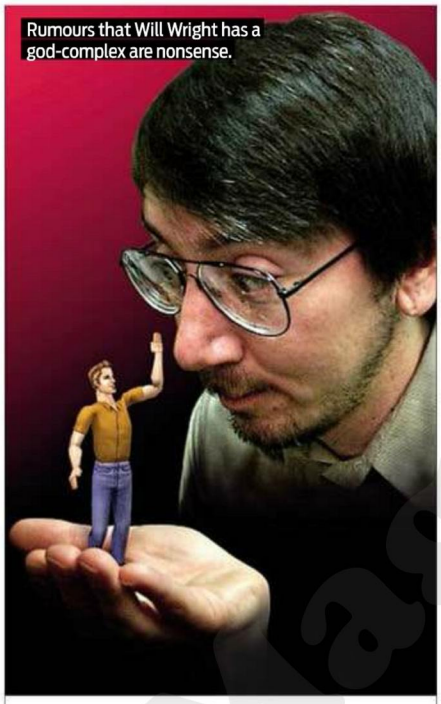
Charles London worked on *The Sims* from 1997 and is now creative director of the series. "Being the incredibly creative and introspective guy [Will Wright] is," London explains, "it naturally led him to a fascination with 'what does it mean to have or not have certain objects? What does it mean for buildings to be arranged one way or another? How does that end up manifesting itself in the wellbeing of its inhabitants?' The people who live in a building and use those objects are the read-out of the quality of the arrangement and choice that were made in the environment."

Wright worked on the idea by himself at first, then in late 1993 formed a small project team inside the company he co-founded, Maxis. He based his concept on several academic works, notably Christopher Alexander's theories of environmental structure as happiness and Charles Hampden-Turner's theories of mental structure. Key to the game though was Abraham Maslow's 1943 paper 'A Theory of Human Motivation' and its core concept: the hierarchy of needs.

The hierarchy puts people's needs in a pyramidal order: until certain basic needs are met, higher needs cannot assert themselves. So for example, the most basic need is hunger, then sleep. "We know that people who are desperately hungry have difficulty sleeping," says London. "Until you are rested you can't really be concerned with how clean you are. Until you're rested and fed and clean, you can't really worry about whether or not you have shelter. So these needs climb up the ladder until you reach things like fun and humour and self actualisation.

"Will, from the earliest point, was using Maslow's hierarchy of needs as the filter for testing whether or not the efficiency of the architecture and the quality of the objects and their arrangement in that architecture was good or bad." It is notable that morality, creativity and spontaneity don't even enter into people's desires until all else is satisfied.

In a focus group test in 1993, *The Sims* came bottom of all Maxis's game concepts in development. That scepticism meant that the game developed very slowly. "It was a battle, the first few years, inside Maxis," Wright told PC Format in 2004. "It was referred to as 'The Toilet Game'." Despite this, Wright secured a young engineer named Jamie Dornbos on the sly, and together they aggressively prototyped.


Rumours that Will Wright has a god-complex are nonsense.

The small team worked on-and-off in Maxis's Walnut Creek headquarters before moving to a tiny rented office in San Mateo around 1996.

> **"Key to the game was the 1943 paper 'A Theory of Human Motivation', and its core concept: the hierarchy of needs"**

During those three years, the prototype was known as 'Home Tactics'. It grew slowly, bringing in a graphics engineer, an animation tech engineer and a project manager. London, then an art director, takes up the story. "Around August 1997, they were looking for someone to put the artwork not just on a more professional footing but actually setting up pipelines. I was essentially the sixth member of the team... I was hired the same day as EA officially acquired Maxis.

"Six months or so after I joined, the team was moved to EA's headquarters in Redwood City... while the disjointed disruption of the acquisition played out in Walnut Creek. Will wanted the project isolated from the distractions of that."

Many of the design decisions at this stage followed naturally from the hierarchy of needs, but it took time. "It was really anything but a straight-ahead clear road to development," says London. "We were developing a type of game that had never been made before. Will is a very intuitive designer. He has experiments he wants to run, he wants to see how something will feel... we build, we iterate, we play with it, we tear stuff out, we put new stuff in. It's one of the reasons it took so many years."

Now, it's easy to portray a game as being one man's creation. It's true that Wright came up with the initial concept for the game, prototyped it and pushed it relentlessly. But his concepts have always been less about people and more about systems, normally based on whichever book he's currently obsessed with.

As London says: "The people were kind of an afterthought. The architecture part was so robust and well-polished at launch as it had been in development the longest. It wasn't until two very influential designers, Clare Curtin and Roxy Wolosenko, joined the team that the focus shifted away from objects and architecture, and onto people. They made many changes to the design, including adding children to the game. Because there were no children, it lacked a certain depth and humanity."

The changes started by Curtin and Wolosenko also changed how the team thought about the game. Previously it had featured three modes the player would switch between as they played: People, Objects and Architecture. With its new focus on people, the modes changed from nouns to verbs: Live, Buy and Build.

"Originally, a nickname for the game was 'The Human Pinball Machine'. And the exciting thing in a pinball machine is the machine, not the ball. It's the designs and the bumpers and the slides and the lights. The pinballs are all alike from machine to machine," says London. Changing the focus from architecture and nouns to people and actions meant that the people had to become more than pinballs, and the game more about providing gamers with the tools to tell their own stories.

The earliest characters for these stories were made using off-the-shelf art programs. "We envisioned the game like a sitcom... the first characters we made were essentially copies of famous sitcom characters from American television. Specifically, Archie and Edith Bunker from All In The Family, and George and Louise Jefferson from The Jeffersons. We did not ship with those assets!"

Soon, the team worked up a character creator, which changed the dynamic again. "The *minute* that a player facing the character creator went in, the urge to want to create yourself, or the urge to pick an asset that kind of looked like you, or to make a family structure that was like the one you lived in or someone you know, was immediately evident. ▸

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Everybody wanted to do that. That was one of the moments when we realised we had magic on our hands."

For London, that realisation came on one particular day: "I was trying to test something. So, you put a Sim in and you set up your situation and you go back, and he would have wandered off. You had to spend a long time looking for him. You would end up penning him in. Then you would go about doing your other things and he would not have what he needed, he'd be getting hungry and tired and he wouldn't be in position for your test."

"So all right, now I have to feed him... all right, now he's tired, let's put a bed in there... Suddenly I realised that 45 minutes had gone by and I'm not testing. I'm picking out wallpaper because, without knowing it, I've switched modes into nurturing him. He's no longer just a test asset – I'm starting to care about whether he has a nice enough bed, I'm playing the game. That's the magic of *The Sims*."

The magic didn't extend beyond the team, though – and getting the game approved for full development still wasn't easy, even for Wright. The Maxis board had been wary of the game, with co-founder Jeff Braun saying they thought Will was out of his mind. Wright himself was skeptical, telling the press at the time that he'd love to make a doll's house game, but it just wasn't marketable.

Notably, EA were a lot more enthusiastic. London, still at EA, is full of praise. "We had a very challenging path to getting into full production... I don't know that this game could have been made at any other company. EA was incredibly supportive and incredibly brave to let this game go forward. It wasn't like anything that had been done before."

Throughout 1998, there was a back-and-forth process with the EA management and the development team, mediated by director of development Jim Mackraz. "We would show them something that greatly excited us, and they would have some difficulty understanding how it was relevant or where it was leading. They would demand that we add things, and then when they saw it next time we wouldn't have, but we would have added others that did pique their interest... and they were very tolerant of this."

To get the game to market, an executive producer called Kana Ryan was put in charge. "She's the one who really put the pressure and guidance and focus on getting this thing to stop being a laboratory experiment, and to actually turn it into something we could sell... she was the grown-up in the room. I want to point out that this happened over and over: a woman joins the team and makes the game deeper, more appealing, more buildable or responsible. The gender balance on our team, I think, was a very important thing for us."

GAMEOGRAPHY

A Sim-ple run-down of Maxis's most Sim-nificant simulations [fire him, then hire him so we can fire him twice – Ed].

Sim City *(1989)*
Sim City is an urban-planning simulator that was the best-selling series of games until *The Sims*. Now open source.

Sim Ant *(1991)*
You control a single ant at a time, which you can use to leave pheromone trails to guide other black ants. Watch out for lawnmowers!

The Sims 2 *(2004)*
Incorporated a new 3D engine and allows Sims to age and die of old age. Sims now have life goals, fears and wants. The game sold 13 million copies.

The Sims 3 *(2009)*
Set in one continuous world, Sims can also now progress without you being around. Not a great leap forward. It sold 10 million copies.

"We had one machine to demo on. I don't even remember if we had a sign; we may have printed out something on a jotter"

With Ryan's new focus, the game was ready for E3 1999 – although EA didn't exactly prioritise it. Back then, E3 was huge and so was EA's booth: "The top of the mountain," London calls it. "The closer you were to the front of the booth, the more important you were. We were literally stuck on the back side of the booth. We had one machine to demo on. I don't even remember if we had a sign; we may have printed out something on a jotter and taped it on."

Despite this, word of mouth spread on the first day, and lines started to form. As there was only one machine, the lines grew. "By the end of the first day we'd won the Game of the Show Award. The lines were, like, over the curve of the earth, man... "

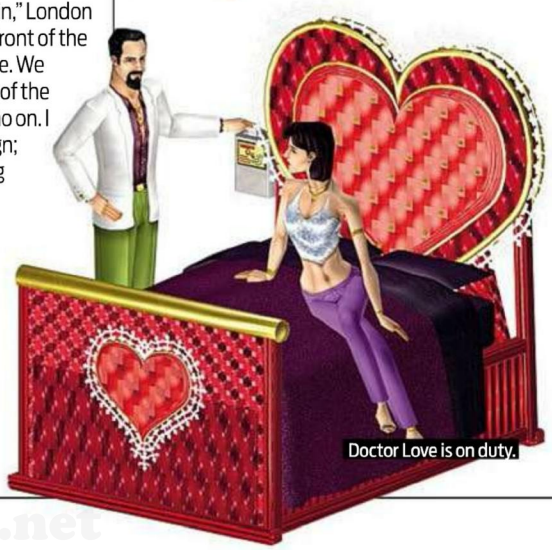
Everybody at E3 wanted to see the game. The line snaked through every other booth, even on competitor's stands, clogging them up. "Those poor people would try to show their demo and the queuers would be like, 'No no, we're just waiting in line for *The Sims*.'"

Command & Conquer developer Joseph B Hewitt IV remembers the morass, demoing *Red Alert* at the same E3: "We had the corner of the EA booth, and *The Sims* were wedged in behind us. It was off in a corner and no one was demoing it. We all thought it was the greatest thing in the world. We were like, 'This is just so cool!', so while everybody else is looking at *Red Alert*, we're behind the little cockpit chair playing *The Sims*."

This was the watershed for the game; the EA higher-ups threw their weight behind it, lavishing marketing money, television advertising and attention on it. "We started galloping towards the finish line. The game got polished and then in February 2000 we released it, and the rest is historical record. We were the best-selling game of that year, the year after, and the year after that; we were best-selling game three years in a row. We had to start figuring out what else to do."

Luckily Wright's team had spent an entire year making the game totally expandable, hence the object-oriented system, where new objects contain the verbs for their own usage, so they could be added and removed easily. Cue expansions galore and 16 million sales, plus 13 million sales for *The Sims 2*, 10 million sales for *The Sims 3*, and over 100 million sales including expansions.

Given its huge success, particularly among the once-inaccessible female market, it's a tribute to the strength and difficulty of its design that *The Sims* hasn't been effectively cloned. It has however been translated into 22 different languages, has its own postage stamp in France, and even its own in-game lethal virus – which was spread maliciously by Wright himself, from a downloadable guinea pig.



Doctor Love is on duty.

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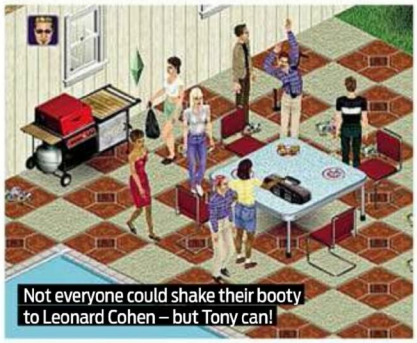
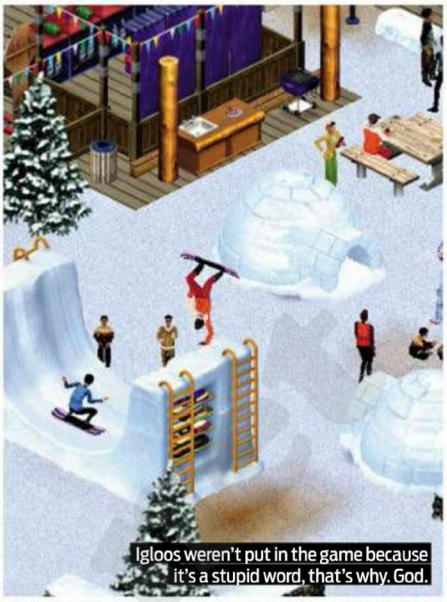
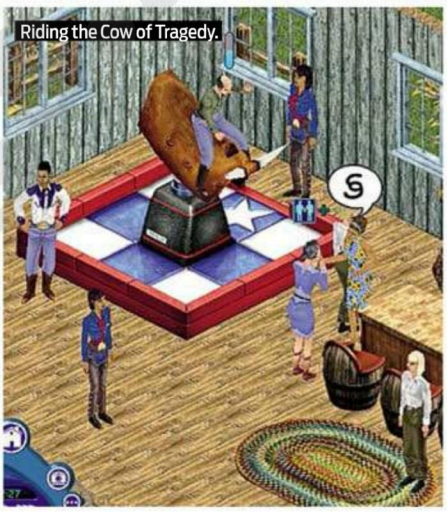
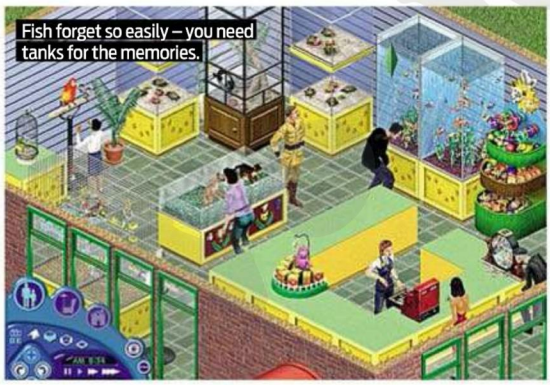
Sims: like you but slimmer and in nicer clothes.

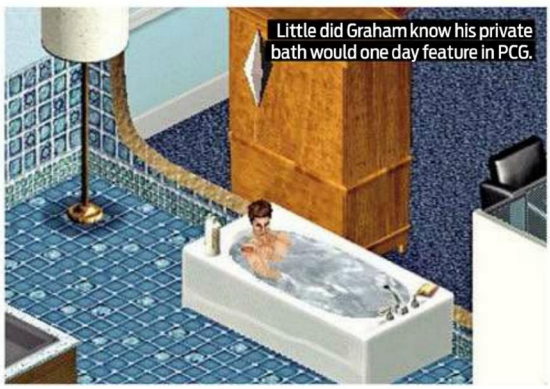

Not everyone could shake their booty to Leonard Cohen – but Tony can!


Igloos weren't put in the game because it's a stupid word, that's why. God.

"What a waste of cake", thought Tim.


Riding the Cow of Tragedy.


Fish forget so easily – you need tanks for the memories.


Little did Graham know his private bath would one day feature in PCG.

Before the Fail Whale was the Lark Shark.

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The greatest games on PC

GO TO WAR...

Total War: Shogun 2

totalwar.com/shogun2

The upcoming *Fall of the Samurai* expansion pits ninjas against cowboys with Gatling guns. Now is the perfect time to try the strategy master.

Also: *StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty, Dawn of War II, Supreme Commander 2, Frozen Synapse, Company of Heroes*

HAVE AN ADVENTURE...

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

elderscrolls.com

Go rambling across a stunning nordic landscape, while fighting dragons, performing necromancy, and stealing the clothes off of people's backs.

Also: *Deus Ex: Human Revolution, Mass Effect 2, The Witcher 2, Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood, Dragon Age 2, Fallout 3*

SHOOT MEN...

Battlefield 3

battlefield.com

Nothing beats the 64-player war of Caspian Border for intense combat, from dramatic last-stands to heroic jet-powered victories.

Also: *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3, Bulletstorm, Stalker: Call of Pripyat, Red Orchestra 2, Just Cause 2, Left 4 Dead 2*

GET SOMETHING FOR NOTHING...

League of Legends

leagueoflegends.com

Blizzard and Valve are both on the verge of joining the MOBA scene, but *LoL* with its 30 million players is the current king of the action RTS.

Also: *Tribes 2, TrackMania Nations Forever, Spelunky, Marathon, Stealth Bastard, N, GTA 2, Freespace 2, Nethack*

LEAD A SECOND LIFE...

Star Wars: The Old Republic

www.swtor.com

It's a vast, fully voiced MMO set in a universe we love. How could you not play it? Come join one of our guilds and get your training lightsaber now.

Also: *World of Warcraft, EVE Online, Lord of the Rings Online, DC Universe Online, Mount & Blade: Warband*

PLAY ON YOUR NETBOOK...

Bejeweled 3

bit.ly/pcgbejeweled3

A slick, exciting puzzle game where gem-matching feels as satisfying as a headshot. Save butterflies, set off chain reactions, dig for gold.

Also: *Monkey Island 2 SE, Day of the Tentacle, Peggle, Bookworm Adventures, Uplink, World of Goo, Braid*

PLAY SOMETHING INDIE

Minecraft

minecraft.net

A bottomless sandbox of adventure and creativity, whether you're building a giant castle on the beach or exploring other servers.

Also: *Limbo, VVVVVV, Revenge of the Titans, AudioSurf, SpaceChem, Super Meat Boy, Magicka*

FLY, DRIVE AND RIDE...

F1 2011

www.formula1-game.com

Striking the perfect balance between sim and accessibility, *F1 2011* is deep, beautiful, dizzyingly fast and delivers the best crashes around.

Also: *Flight Simulator X, TIE Fighter, Silent Hunter 4, Black Shark, Race Driver Grid, DiRT 3, Burnout Paradise*

PWN SOME NOOBS...

FIFA 12

www.ea.com/fifa

The best football game in the world is finally at its best on PC, and it's completely captivated the office. Please write and tell Graham how to win.

Also: *Counter-Strike: Source, Unreal Tournament III, Super Street Fighter IV, Team Fortress 2, StarCraft II*

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Gaming news
to get your
teeth into...
CVG
computerandvideogames.com

ADVERTISING FEATURE

WHAT MMO?

"If you prefer a more personal approach to flight, give *Aion* a look"

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TAKE TO THE SKIES

Would you rather have a jetpack, a pair of wings, or your own starship?

This month has seen a flood of free MMOs that let you slip the surly bonds of Earth (or Atreia, or the Wilderzone) and do battle in the air. Cryptic's *Star Trek Online*, for example, is now free-to-play, allowing you to unleash your inner Trekker at the helm of a wide range of Federation and Klingon ships.

All areas and missions are available on a free account, although you'll need to pay to unlock extra character and bridge officer slots. Subscribers and those with lifetime accounts will have all of these limitations removed, of course, and also receive a monthly stipend of 400 points that can be spent on ships and crew in the Cryptic store.

If you prefer a more personal approach to flight, then give *Aion* a look. The anime-inspired MMO goes free-to-play this month, and with no limits on content for free players it's fully possible to get your fill without spending a penny. *Aion*'s stand-out feature is the wings that your character earns around level nine. These allow you to soar freely around many of the game's massive zones, and are even used for airborne PvP in the Abyss region.

Finally, *Tribes Ascend*'s open beta is almost upon us. The successor to the original team multiplayer shooter has been steadily improving as developers Hi-Rez work with fans to pin down the all important feel of jetpacking and skiing across the game's open environments. Hi-Rez have one eye on the e-sports community, and will be supporting custom rulesets on private servers in addition to the public play's free-for-all. Sound like your sort of thing? Flip back a few pages: you're guaranteed access and a sum of in-game currency with the key giveaway in this very issue.

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WHAT MMO?

Find out more
http://allods.gpotato.eu

ALLODS ONLINE VOL. 5 GAME OF GODS

You win or die in the battle for the Great Rank

It's difficult to stand out from the crowd in most MMOs. No matter how many dragons you slay or how rare a hat you make, there'll always be somebody who has been there, done that, and bought the +2 T-shirt of superiority. No longer, if *Allods Online* has its say. *Game of Gods*, the latest expansion to gPotato's free-to-play fantasy MMO, will allow you to compete with everyone else on your server for the Great Rank, a position of singular honour that grants the very best with an extra skill point, a precious ruby, and an extra slot for a customised class build.

The journey to greatness will take you to higher realms of existence, with thirteen new allods – magical floating islands – and access to the 4th layer of Astral space. Cruising the gulfs between worlds in your flying ship has been improved with a revamped physics system that makes ship-to-ship combat faster and more fun.

There's plenty to do with your feet on the ground, too. The level cap has been increased to 51 and volume five also adds a whole new raid and a 24-player PvP Battleground for anyone over level 20. The zone allows players from the Empire or League factions to fight each other as well as members of their own side.

Finally, the Bard is a new archetype that uses the power of song to bolster their allies and weaken their foes. They can be played by Elves, Kanians, Xadaganians, and Orcs, and each race brings something different to the table: Xadaganians, for example, can use music to silence enemy casters. The Bard's area-of-effect fear ability is sure to make a difference in large-scale battles.

Game of Gods is due this month, and there's never been a better time to join the quest for greatness.

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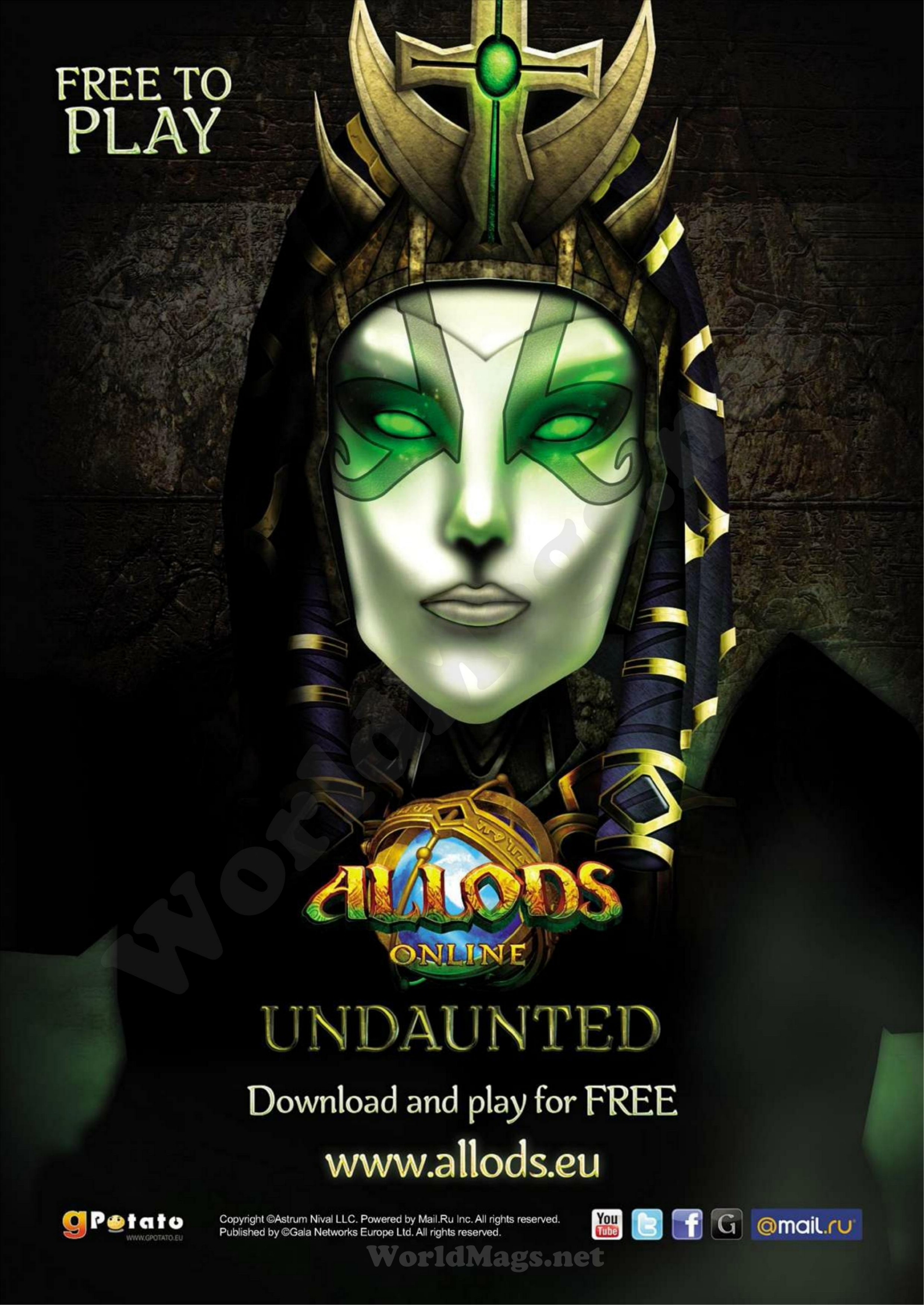

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SEVEN ways to tell if the player is into you

A companion's guide to romance in The Old Republic

1 **Has the player personally given you more than 300 identical belts?**
While receiving one of these only signifies a passing interest in you, getting hundreds is a clear sign of true love. Wait until 400 to be sure they're serious, then take your relationship to the next level with confidence.

2 **Does the player pause, sometimes for minutes at a time, before replying to you?**
Don't worry, this is a good sign. It means they're carefully considering which dialogue option will score them the most Affection points with you – it's the player equivalent of caring. That, or they're AFK.

3 **Does the player sometimes stop talking to you, briefly leave the room, and then begin exactly the same conversation over again?**
Now you know they're serious. If they insist on hearing your every potential response to every question they can ask you, then they're not just interested – they're trying to make it perfect.

4 **Did the world unexpectedly go dark during a tender moment with your player?**
Congratulations, you've had sex! This is one of the strongest signs the player is interested in you, or at least mildly horny. Don't worry about the fact that you have no recollection of what happened – this is normal.

5 **Has your player ever refused to group with friends just so they don't have to dismiss you?**
If they're willing to put up with kill-stealing and loot confusion just to keep you around, you know they're serious. Or that most of their friends couldn't heal a bacta tank.

6 **Does your player never send you on Crew Missions?**
Keep calm, they probably just want to keep you close. Contrary to common wisdom, being ordered to crawl around in a Sarlacc's stomach looking for gemstones is not always a sign of affection. Be glad that they sent the annoying protocol droid instead.

7 **Does your player ignore other companions, even the ones who look suspiciously identical to you?**
This doesn't mean they're not attracted to you! Quite the opposite: ignoring your identical counterparts is a way for players to convince themselves that they're the only person in the universe you're hanging out with.

Next month!

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE WEDNESDAY, MARCH 14

FEATURES...
- THE FUTURE OF LEAGUE OF LEGENDS
- FLIGHT SIMS EXPLORED
- SHOOTMANIA

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- HOW COMMAND & CONQUER WAS MADE
- REVISITING VALVE'S FORGOTTEN GAME

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